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What the kids want the kids shall receive!

Newsweek recently put a lipstick imprint on their cover and asked the question: What do woman really want? One female reader wrote in, basically responding with: stop already with the condescension!

If it is true that around 97 percent of kids ages 12 to 17 play games, as a recent national survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project claims, then that means a lot of girls are playing games, and they may not be of age yet to be swayed by a Sarah Palin and the fun political games, but they certainly are the next big target for the Nintendos and Sonys and Microsofts.

So what do women gamers want? Like the Newsweek reader, our own Heather Campbell last month basically said in her Back of the Book column: stop with the condescension!

It's the job of marketing types and those who are veiled taste makers to pose the big questions, like what women want, and it's my job to get increasingly agitated at this plastic misguided process. But then again, the stock argument is that I'm not a woman, and the truth is, I am told there are some things that my brain doesn't process in the same way, like the pure pleasures of a pink Nintendo DS. Maybe you should take a look at female gamer Lesley Smith's perspective on the feminine touch, starting on page 24.

So what do men want out of gaming? That I'll answer for myself, and it's really a lot more than shooting off bullets. We are likely destined to spend the rest of our gaming lives mostly killing things, mostly with guns of some sort. That's just the way it is. Games are about actions, and these actions require connecting with an object in a space. That standard connection has mostly become the impact of a bullet. Or more abstractly, the impact of anything that serves to destroy. Little Big Planet, a most delightful and endearing game, contains a ton of big destruction, because it's fun. But if you want big sales, the fun must contain chainsaw guns and accurately modeled AK-47s. That's bad-ass fun, bad-ass dollars, bad-ass marketing machine grease.

Games of course really are more complex than all this, as are the demographics who love them. The argument about what defines gameplay and its importance and what precisely makes the best games hum continues to be a nebulous endeavor. As someone who makes a living expressing what I like about a game, sometimes that expression is put into fresh question. Take Bioshock as a recent musing. The PlayStation 3 version of this acclaimed adventure is purely the 360 version; a few little extras here and there are inane blurbs for the back of the box that mean nothing to the essence of the game. And it is that essence that is so beguiling. The first time through Bioshock's watery grave was an occasionally moving experience, and I really believe so much of that experience flowed from the atmosphere and visions that didn't appear like every other game that came before it.

"So what do men want out of gaming?"

Par for the course, there were guns and lots of bullets in there as well. Playing Bioshock for the second time, I realized much more how decently average the killing bits are, blinded to that observation—or rather more immune to its deadening effect—the first time through because of the intoxication of this extraordinary place I was being ominously guided around. The atmosphere pushed me away from getting too worked up about the bad bits—the interminable hacking, the lapses in gameplay logic for sake of "open world," the languid back and forth near the climax. All that, and here is a game that I'd still fight for a game of the year mention.

I'd love to see ... hell, just a couple games a year that don't ask you to destroy things for their pleasures. Most of these games really aren't *that* good at it anyways. We take what we can get, because what we get is really good, and really good is good enough.

But if I can try and tackle the big question again from my cushy subjective chair, this male gamer thinks games would start enriching us more if we could just get away from the destruction bits a little more than we do. And if I may be so bold and answer for the ladies, I think they might agree. - ***Brady Fiechter***

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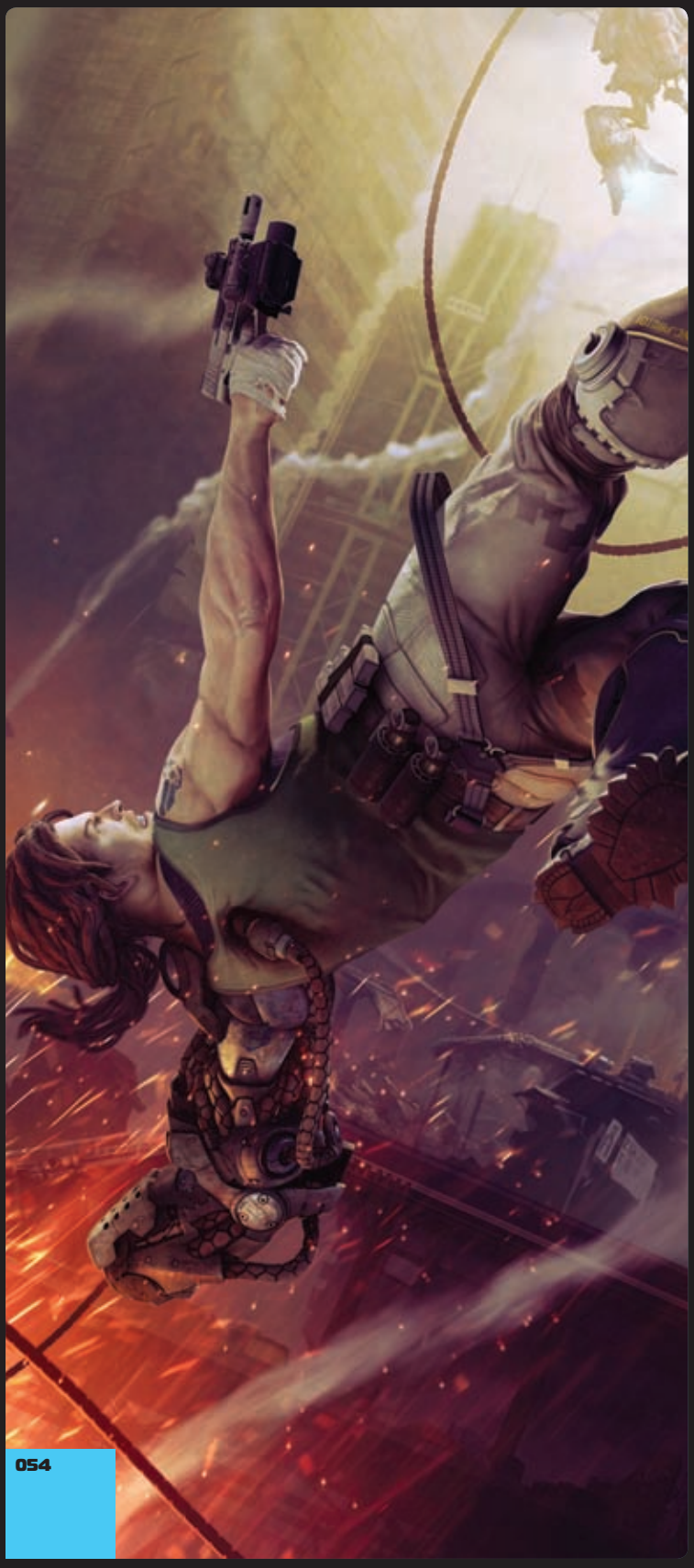

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Jump in.

XBOX 360

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news | trends | gossip | assorted nonsense

We want Jim! We want Jim!...

The Rise and Fall and Rise of InterPlay

The videogame industry is a harsh mistress. It is also, as history has shown, a widowmaker. The tombstones of fallen game companies could fill a sizable graveyard: 3DO, Atari, Accolade, Acclaim, ASC Games, Broderbund, Coleco, Data East, Data Soft, GT Interactive, Infocom…

Sometimes, however, game companies can emerge from their own ashes—and certainly not in the pale, hardly mentionable manner of existing-in-name-only manner of Atari and Acclaim.

Founded in 1983, California-based developer and publisher Interplay Entertainment produced a number of quality PC and console games. The company won a loyal audience based on the strength of Baldur's Gate, Earthworm Jim, Fallout, Giants, MDK, Run Like Hell, and a series of licensed Star Trek games.

Things began to slide when French game company Titus Interactive purchased Interplay. Titus' acquisition, coupled with losses from terrible games such as Blues Brothers 2000, RoboCop, and Superman 64, put both companies on rocky economic footing. In 2002, the National Association of Security Dealers Automated Quotations (NASDAQ) delisted Interplay's stock for poor performance.

In 2004, Interplay closed its doors. The California government briefly shut down the company's Irvine offices; Interplay had failed to pay its workers. Interplay's landlord issued the company an eviction notice for missed rent. The remnants of Interplay's braintrust would spend the next three years dealing with the fallout.

Now, however, Interplay may have turned itself around. Selling the Fallout license to Bethesda Softworks provided enough cash for the company to restart its development studios.

Almost immediately, the newly revived Interplay announced plans to create sequels for some of its franchises including Earthworm Jim, MDK, Dark Alliance, and Descent. The company has also licensed Fallout from its new owner, Bethesda, and is planning to make a massively multiplayer game based on the post-apocalyptic role-playing series. Interplay has also heralded the return of some its most talented creators: Doug TenNaple, the artist responsible for Earthworm Jim, will serve as a consultant for Earthworm Jim 4, and both Chris Taylor and Jason Anderson from the original Fallout will be contributing to the Fallout online title.

The old Interplay may also live on via the Nintendo Wii. Interplay titles for the Sega Genesis, among them Earthworm Jim, Earthworm Jim 2, Clayfighter, and Boogerman are slated to release on the Wii's downloadable Virtual Console service.

It remains to be seen exactly how Interplay's revival will play out. If the company does manage to mount a comeback the next time you see Earthworm Jim will be on Play's cover.

All eyes on DSi

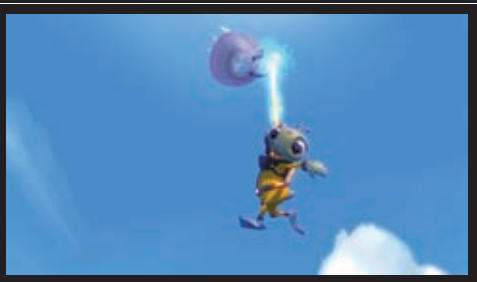
A new DS revision and a lot of new software from Nintendo

Ah, timing: just as we're set to go to press, Nintendo goes and announces a new DS model. Coming this November in Japan (and mid '09 on our shores) is the Nintendo DSi, a new model of the DS that takes the idea of the DS Lite, makes it a tad thinner and lighter, tosses out the GBA slot, and adds in two separate cameras (for taking and editing pictures), bigger screens, an SD slot (allowing for photo sharing and playback of AAC music files), better speakers, and some intriguing new features. Most interesting of all, through the built-in web browser, you'll be able to purchase DS Ware, downloadable games that reside inside your DSi via built-in Flash RAM.

Along with that came a whole host of game announcements, such as Mario & Luigi 3 for the DS, remixed versions of Brain Age 1 & 2 for DS Ware, and titles like a new Punch-Out!!, Sin and Punishment 2, Cave Story, and quite a few popular GameCube remakes (such as Metroid Prime and Pikmin 2) coming to the Wii.

The Maw Mauls the Competition

The PAX 10



Congratulations to The Maw, the new indie game from Twisted Pixel Games that we covered back in our July issue. At the recent Penny Arcade Expo, the game was selected to be part of The PAX 10, a group of ten independently developed games showcased at the show, and it was recently announced that The Maw ended up winning the 2008 Audience Choice award.

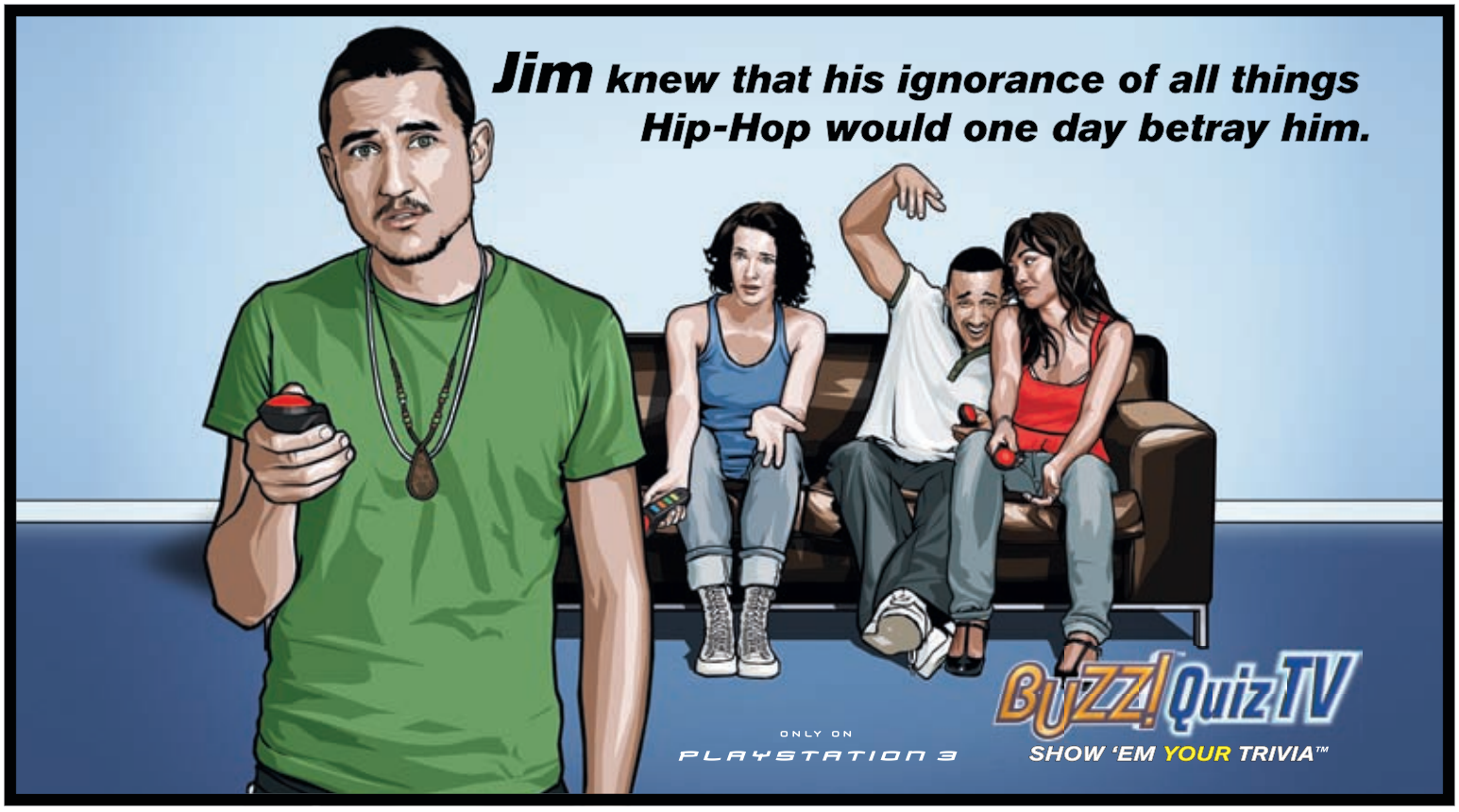
BOOKREVIEW

Porn and Pong: How Grand Theft Auto, Tomb Raider and Other Sexy Games Changed Our Culture

As a guy who's been gaming since the mid-70's release of Coleco's Telstar (an early *Pong* rip-off), and one who purchased his first PC "coincidentally" around the time pirated jpegs of Jenny McCarthy's Playboy pictorials began circulating the Internet—though, I think we were still calling it the World Wide Web, back then—I felt like Damon Brown's *Porn and Pong* was written just for me. Well, me and every other 30-something male with affection for boobs and videogames.

Sure enough, Brown's titillating tome offers a fun and informative history of the often-intertwining paths of the videogame and pornography industries. Much of the sex-in-gaming ground covered—Lara Croft, Hot Coffee—will be familiar to anyone who's picked up a gamepad or girlie mag, but Brown digs deeper, offering interesting historic details that may come as a surprise to even the most hardcore enthusiast of pop-culture's buns-and-guns obsession; for example, while I knew Nintendo got its start as a playing card manufacturer, I had no idea they kept the Yakuza in fresh decks. While tidbits like this kept me page turning, I was disappointed no dirt was uncovered regarding the origin of Mario's porn-stache. **Matt Cabral**

Released by: Ferel House **Author:** Damon Brown **Length:** 158 pages **Available:** Now



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Go forth and slaughter

To the staff at Play magazine. I would like to thank the Play Team for your article pertaining to Resident Evil 5 and the unintentional racism in the game. Most other videogame magazines, television shows, etc., have toyed with the issue either saying it was racist or not with out ever giving a reason for it being or not being such. I am an African American gamer who happens to live in South Carolina. Hooray for South Carolina being in the top five for high school drop out rate, infant mortality rate, and unemployment. Our state government has recently "needed" to trim its spending budget due to the slowing economy. Public School funding got cut, but it's alright (sarcasm) because the public schools will now receive some of the funding the State Government was giving to the colleges. Nobody says anything about these despairs, but mention moving the Confederate flag off the State House and the shit hits the fan. The supporters of the flag say it's a part of the state's history, "heritage," and should be kept on the State House grounds. The opponents of the flag say it represents a racist oppressive regime and it belongs in a museum if anywhere. When I first saw the RE5 trailer I said to myself, "That white guy killing black people isn't cool." However when one of my friends asked me if I'd still buy the game I said yes. In truth I was more offended at Grand Theft Auto San Andreas' use of the "N"word than at the slaying of the African villagers in RE5.

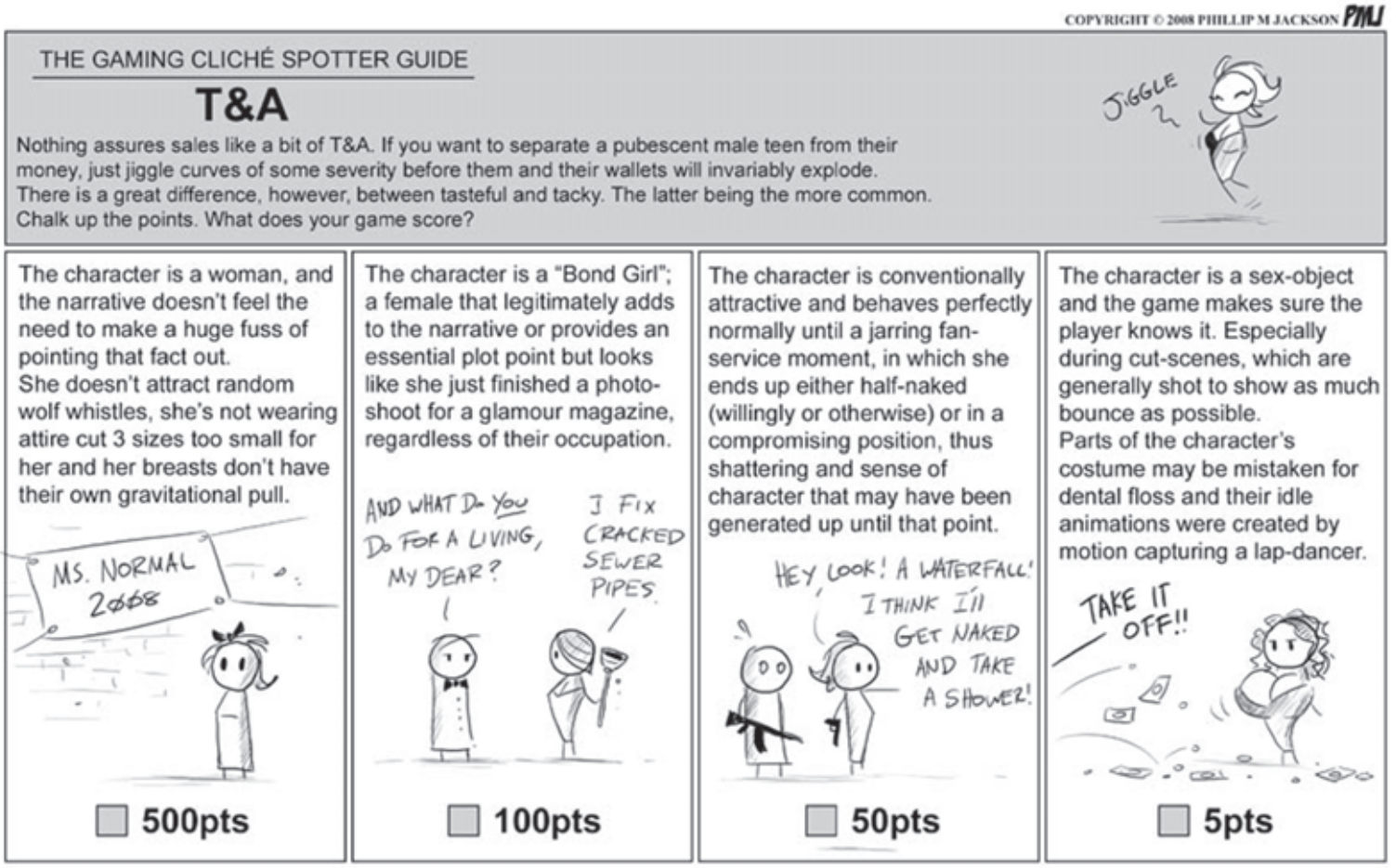
Understandably the good folks at Capcom aren't exposed to the seemingly day to day grind of American police racial profiling minorities, or Caucasian law officers accidently killing black people whose keys looked like a gun. I've experienced racism from law officers first hand but I kind of take it as part of life. Just keep your hands on the steering wheel. Racism is in the eye of the beholder and as stated in your article Capcom wouldn't make a game about Japanese soldiers killing Korean or Chinese peasants and an American developer wouldn't make a game about American cattlemen massacring American Indians. Also stated in your article was the use of such imagery as propaganda in the past to help dehumanize certain groups of people. The film Birth of a Nation is a fine example of such. Unlike Birth of a Nation however, Resident Evil 5's racism is unintentional.

As the video game industry grows there's bound to be more of these issues to come up. In closing I'd like to applaud Play Magazine's stepping forward to address the issue and inform the readers as to why or why not Resident Evil 5 may or may not be racist. Play's article was backed by facts and not simply, "this is my opinion and so it's right because it's the way I think and if you disagree you're an idiot."

THANK YOU PLAY MAGAZINE

Mr.Rapp.

Simply put your Magazine has given me hope that "gaming" is not just an asinine pastime filled to the brim with incoherent hype and adolescent immaturity. I have just recently subscribed to your magazine eagerly awaiting every issue to read what I believe are truly unbiased and viciously intelligent articles, reviews, and news. I have also noticed through your letters section that a large amount people are condemning you for the removal of numeric scaling on games, which in all honesty I find completely atrocious and ironic that these pundits and number happy readers wouldn't take the pleasure of reading what is



"What is the real deal with resolutions with the current platforms?"

mainly a medium for words; a magazine. Your reviews are perfect and one of the main reasons I have gravitated to your publication. Above all I love the passion in your work, something that I have noticed lacking as of late in the gaming community. It is very easy to become apathetic towards something that may seem benign like gaming, but I can say that with the responsibilities of life from being a husband, a student, and a full time employee the time that I do have is very valuable and I can say that part of that time is dedicated to your words.

Thanks

Hugo Dupuy

Where's the HD?
I am a gamer of more than 3 decades and owner of multiple platforms. I have always judged a game first and foremost on its gameplay, and secondly on it's visual artistry. That said having recently bought a high end flat panel and spent a lot of money on the latest platforms. I am confused and curious about the state of graphic resolutions that are being utilized in the industry right now. When trying to track down information as to what the REAL resolution standards are I get so many different adamant beliefs as to whether all games are 720p, 1080I, 1080P and Sony and Microsoft don't help the matter with their shady explanation of why their systems DO run in certain resolutions which they in fact don't seem to run in.

For example Star Wars: Force Unleashed just came out and Microsoft has on their box 1080p, whereas Sony has on theirs 720p. There are hardware upscales and software upconverters, etc... But the fact of that matter is I am just a gamer interested in getting the best visuals for the games I love to play. Is there an easy way to figure this out? What is the real deal with resolutions with the current platforms?

Yours truly,

Lost in Resolution

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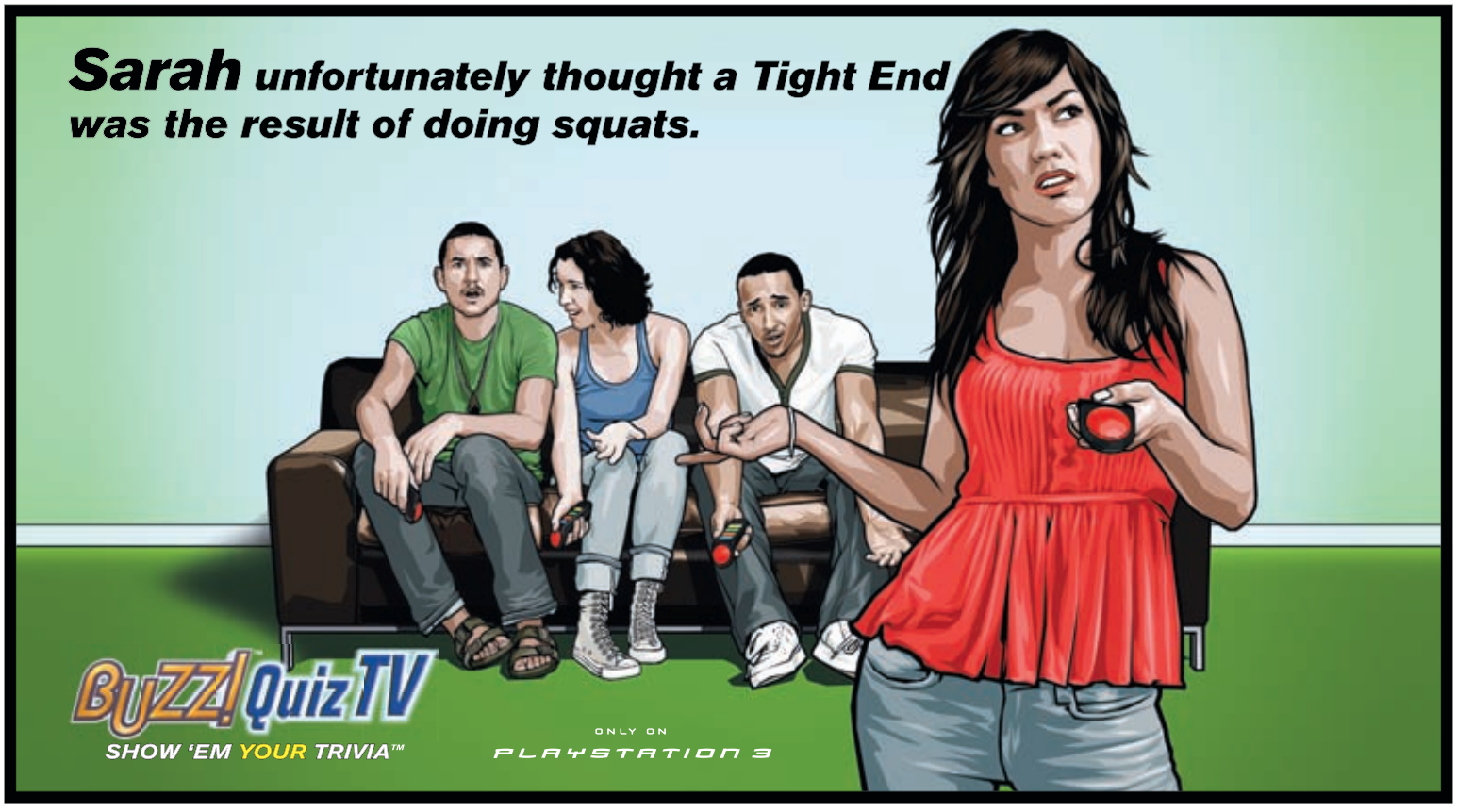


“You’ve got this awesome game you wanna sell? Sure, as long as you account for this checklist of 400 pointless prerequisites.”

words Brandon Justice

So I’m not sure about this whole DLC thing. Not the idea of it, mind you…that’s all sorts of awesome. I mean, as the cost of doing business in the games industry continues to spiral out of control with each passing generation, the opportunity to enter the market on your own terms is a rare and beautiful dream that most cubicle cronies can only caress when they sneak in a wink between production poke-and-prod patrols during a monthlong crunch.

But the arrival of Xbox Live, PSN, Wii Ware, Steam and other progressive publishing opportunities presents developers with the one thing the companies with “real” money fail to provide in any “real” sense to the folks that line their pockets in the first place: a sweet, sexy scene the entrepreneurially inclined like to call “opportunity.”

You see, somewhere between watching Gabe Newell turn it into a business model and noticing that the gamers they can never quite seem to snare are flocking to simple, addictive experiences via their web browsers, the powers that be in publishing started to realize there was something to this downloadable nonsense after all.

So after a few growing pains, there’s genuine truth to the notion that almost any idea is in reach if you scope, sculpt and sell it properly. The big three and a few others have created a nifty little market out there, where everything from emulated arcade classics to awe-inspiring originals are dropping on a regular basis, to the kudos of cooing critics everywhere.

So what’s my deal, you ask?

Well, as much as I adore the concept that drives it, I’m not too sure I buy the notion that it’s the answer to everything that ails the discerning gamer who’s yet to hop wholeheartedly onto the next-gen bandwagon.

Sure, it’s great that people can instantly access res’d up remakes of their favorite childhood chipsets or pretend to enjoy painfully pedantic puzzlers, but I’m not sure that I’ll trade polish or pretense for what’s coming just yet.

I loved Bionic Commando: Rearmed. Really. And WipEout HD? F*** yeah. And hell, even if playing it felt like trying to open your birthday presents without ripping the wrapping paper, Braid was a good poster child for a format that desperately needs a media darling.

But the thing is, there are still so many issues with the current landscape, and most of them start with the same core problem that kicks would-be “big league” creatives in the teeth on a regular basis:

Ultimately, the people who hold the keys to this virtual kingdom are the same folks who aren’t exactly adept at picking winners on the main stage. Just take a look at the way our industry is becoming more and more like Hollywood, utterly obsessed with the big win and almost entirely oblivious to obvious opportunities for innovation—these poor folks sure do shovel a lot of expensive landfill fodder our way these days when you really stop to think

about it.

And yeah, there are some exceptions like the aforementioned Valvies, who are on an undeniably enviable roll, locating and lifting up hot industry talent. But by and large, people simply stick to what they know. We should be getting our socks knocked off at every turn, but this sort of comedic conservatism has ultimately resulted in a great list of remakes, retreads and sad sequels.

So while most game grunts genuinely long to explore the opportunities afforded to us by ever-advancing technologies, most managers are solely focused on coasting along in a concentrated effort to maintain the bottom line. These folks aren't out there reinventing the wheel; they're just getting reeeaaal efficient at slapping a new coat of high-poly paint on games we wore out before most gamers were a gleam in Miyamoto's eye.

Making this creative cock-block worse are the prohibitive policies and practices associated with getting on the big-ticket services like XBL or PSN. Your idea a bit too quirky? It doesn't fit their content goals. You wanna publish WHAT on our service? Sorry, kid, it's not quirky enough. You've got this awesome game you wanna sell? Sure, as long as you account for this checklist of 400 pointless prerequisites.

Ugh.

In the end, I just wonder if we're seeing this whole movement correctly. Is it a great thing that we can finally enjoy some of gaming's best moments, often with unbelievable upgrades that genuinely enrich the experience? Of course. But does that mean that we should take them for more than they are? Or that we should forget about the creative vortex that exists in most major publishing houses across this industry?

Hell no.

As much as I adore the fact that the development door swings a lot wider than it has in years past, I can't help but get pissed off when I think about why it's such a big deal in the first place.

At the end of the day, I'm reminded of a quote by the venerable Ellsworth Toohey: "I play the stock market of the spirit and I sell short."

It sticks with me because, though I can't remember the last time I enjoyed myself as much as I did hacking through the countryside in Castle Crashers, we've just got so much room for improvement. There are so many age-old issues we don't even try to tackle. There are just…*so* many questions we haven't even thought to *ask*.

I don't know about you, but instead of going after the low-hanging retail fruit, I'd rather see publishers develop a medium in which the industry's best and brightest can constantly push those boundaries. A place where out-of-touch executives can't freely take a dump on the next big thing because they didn't like the pastels in your PowerPoint presentation. One where games we all know would be awesome can *just get made*.

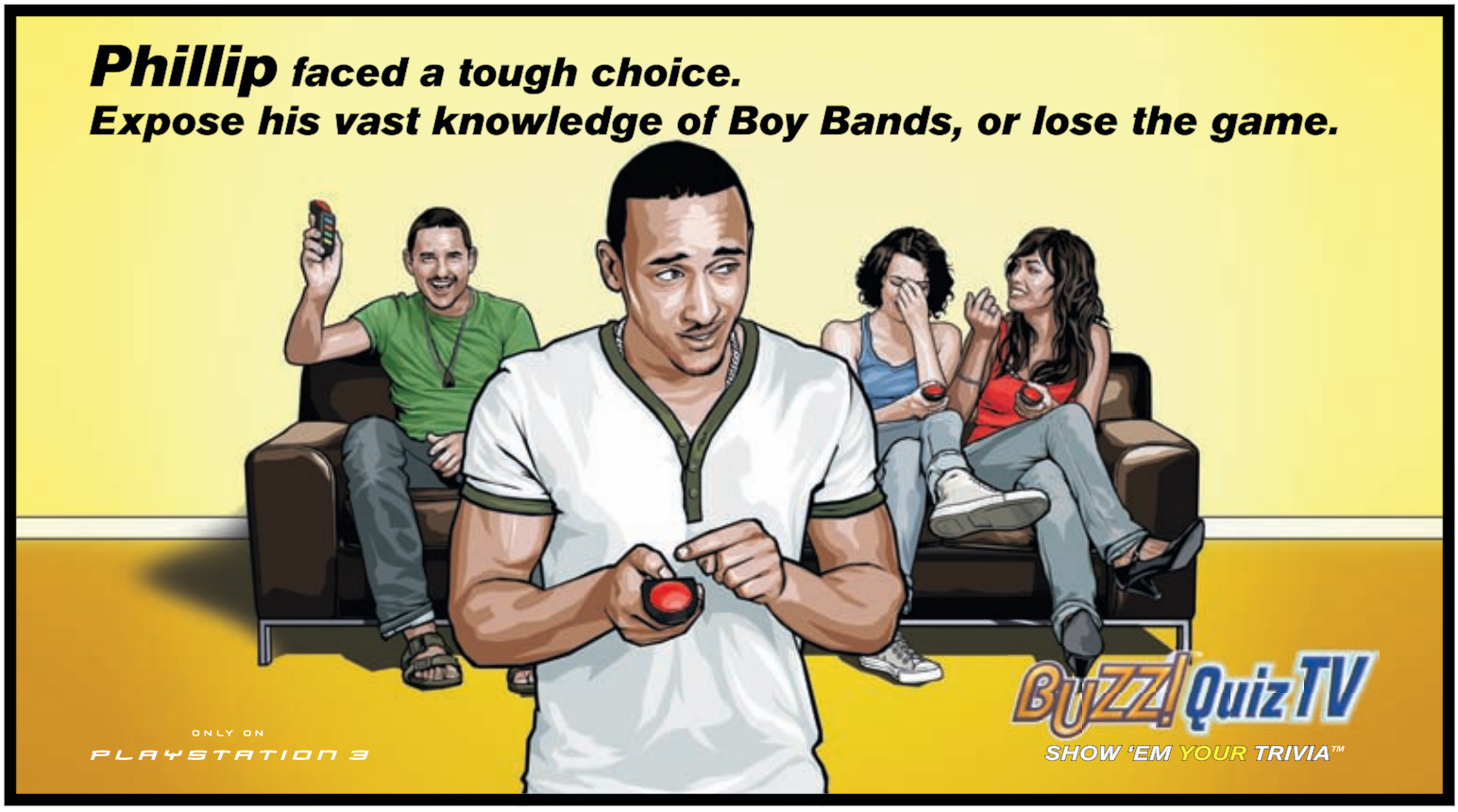
Seriously, folks…when will game companies start placing a premium on feeding their "idea" people? When will a console manufacturer step up and remove one of development's biggest hurdles by, say, buying one of the big engines and make it part of their box's middleware package? When will console DLC communities allow consumers to have more say in where their money goes? When will publishers begin sponsoring contests for upstart developers to prototype new game ideas in exchange for the right of first refusal? I mean, hell, it worked for Simon Cowell, right?

These things have to happen sooner or later. Or maybe they don't. Maybe I'm nuts. Perhaps, but personally, I think we're selling our talent short. I agree that there is some awesome stuff online, and that the preservation and appreciation of gaming's past has a definite place in this industry, but the bottom line is, we still need to find a way to help indie developers get it done, and what's more, we need to find a way to emancipate the imaginations of our community as a whole.

This new chapter in gaming should have been a good start. Now, it *has* been interesting, but as much as I love it, I can't help but get the distinct impression that this slow, sneaky cycle of creative inflation isn't the answer. It's just another way for us to avoid the larger questions and, frankly, that kinda sucks.

Just sayin'.

Brandon Justice is trying to programmatically release his inner child as design director for Play Hard Sports. Feel free tell him how he just "doesn't get" Braid at bjustice@playhard.net.



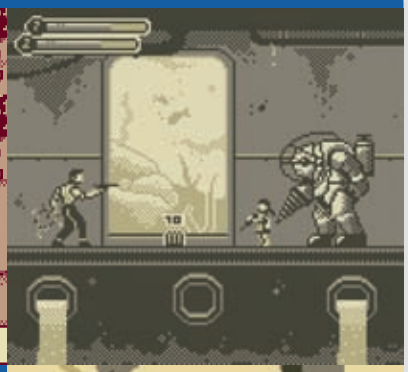
GAMING CULTURE

Gaming times 3

words Evan Shamoon

The Great Wall

If your home environment needs a bit of pixelation, look no farther than the Internet: Blik is a "vinyl wall decal" company, and their catalog just grew to include some official Nintendo designs. There's a set from the original Super Mario Bros., another for Donkey Kong, and a shiny New Super Mario Bros. collection. Each set comes broken down into sprites, meaning you still have the freedom to arrange them on your wall the way you choose. Fortunately, Nintendo's not the only option when it comes to outfitting your walls with Blik: there's also a host of different Space Invader sprites if eight bits are a little too many for your tastes.



The Game Boys Reloaded

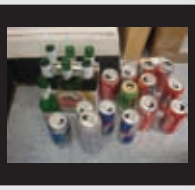
In case you missed it (and you probably did), the kids over at Pixelation's forums ran a contest a while back to see who could come up with the best mock-ups for a Game Boy remake. The results are spectacular, and given the restraints—2-bit color, 8x8 tiles, two three-color sprite palettes, to name a few—are even spectacularer. It's not easy picking favorites here, but it's hard to argue with the Okami, Out of This World, and BioShock remixes.

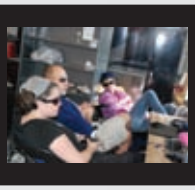
LittleBigContest

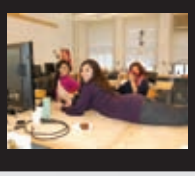
It was a war of the cute virtual worlds last month at Parson's School of Design in New York City, where students slaved away for 24 continuous hours creating levels for Sony's LittleBigPlanet. The challenge was to design a level from scratch, using the game's extensive object and level creation tools; the students came into the event with little-to-no experience with the title or its level editor.

At the end of the 24-hour period, the teams presented their levels to a panel of judges consisting of members of LBP developer Media Molecule, as well as design experts from Parsons and IDEO, a global design consultancy. The winning levels will be featured in a specially branded Parsons section within LittleBigPlanet when it launches next month.

The Best of Jam (and the accompanying $1000 prize) went to Team Sportsmanship, which crafted a homage to Sony's own Shadow of the Colossus using the LBC toolset, complete with, you know…colossi. Check it out online.







NPD GROUP

DATABASE

NOVEMBER **2008**

U.S. Video Game Sales - August 07/08

	Aug-07	Aug-08	YTD Aug 07	YTD Aug 08
Videogames Total Sales	$994.76M	$1.08M	$8.02B	$10.55B
Total Hardware Sales	$384.59M	$394.53M	$3.11B	$3.73B
Total Software Sales	$489.06M	$550.67M	$3.80B	$5.45B
Total Accessories Sales	$121.11M	$137.33M	$1.11B	$1.38B

Hardware Sales August 2008

PlayStation 3	185.4K
PlayStation Portable	253.0K
Playstation 2	144.1K
Xbox 360	195.2K
Wii	453.0K
Nintendo DS	518.3K

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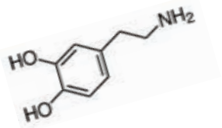


MARRIED TO THE GAME

Game Widow restores faith, marriage…

words Greg Orlando

It's a classic boy meets girl, girl loses boy to electronic entertainment, boy and girl beat game addiction story. And it's no fairy tale.

Luckily, neither is it a horror story. Author Wendy Kays married Graham Kays, lead designer for Sony's SOCOM titles, and quickly discovered she was a game widow—a wife whose spouse has been lost to videogames. Over the course of six years, Kays and her husband managed to fix their ailing marriage and work through, if not wholly break, a videogame addiction.

Game Widow, published by Synergy Books, retells Kays' story. The book, while clearly a vanity press effort, is certainly heartfelt and possibly revelatory. Its strategies for working through a game addiction are certainly sound, and may well be an aid for all those who struggle with a loved one's fixation with games.

Make no mistake about it: Game addiction exists. It's real, and the evidence has filtered in from places like South Korea, where men have died because they neglected their bodies while engaging in marathon stints playing StarCraft and massively multiplayer online role-playing games. Kays herself won't come right out and say game addiction is a clinical illness, opting to take a more balanced, evenhanded approach, but does note, "Parents, siblings, relatives and friends of obsessive gamers, whether or not there is an official, professional diagnosis of addiction, can't help but recognize the eerie similarity between the symptoms of drug use and behavioral addiction to videogames."

Kays succeeds mightily in telling a personal story. At first, she was frustrated enough to take a picture of the back of her husband's head—a poignant illustration of how her marriage was being lost to videogames. Finally, she took action, creating a rigorous strategy to engage her husband. She learned about videogames and the industry. She learned to listen. And, for the good of the team, she says, "I had to suck it up and apologize, even if I didn't feel I was the problem. This was the only way to keep us both calm so we could fix things instead of attaching blame."

Together, Kays and her husband set down a few simple guidelines. Graham would indicate on a calendar when he would be playing games. The couple would allot time for dates—time spent outside the house, together, and certainly without videogames or game magazines. Finally, both agreed to eat all meals at the kitchen table.

Slowly, Graham came to note exactly how much time he spent playing games. Wendy discovered she no longer needed to nag her husband about his game time. Eating at the kitchen table encouraged weight loss and inspired the couple to seek out other ideas.

"It worked slowly," Kays says, "and the first year was hell. But it got better, and the truth is that, although we still have challenges and regularly get angry, lonely and frustrated, we're actually really happy now."

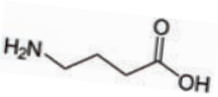
Her strategies, both personally crafted and plucked from professional sources, are certainly sound. She recommends leaving if a situation turns violent, and being persistent in seeking answers to questions or requests from an obsessive gamer. Wisely, she also says that trying to force counseling on someone who does not want to go is a waste of time.

Ultimately, there are three strategies for dealing with an addicted game fan, Kays says: She opted to renegotiate, but others may be forced to live with it or leave entirely. "You have to accept that you can only take control and responsibility for yourself, not the gamer," she writes. "You can't make adults change, and you can't make decisions for them, except by force. And if you choose that path, you're in for an unsustainable, depressing and exhausting battle."

Kays extends her strategies to parents who have children who play games. She suggests supervising gameplay and limiting play times, which is inherently smart, but her idea that children should "develop or express a unique persona" is perhaps pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking. Here, Kays recommends that kids ultimately have specific goals that will "turn real life into a game with real stakes." This assumes life is not inherently a game, and that circumstances will have to be manipulated and shaped by the parents for maximum effect. In fact, it may well be that children play videogames as a palatable alternative to the ultimate game—life.

Regardless of the book's shortcomings, Kays tells an intriguing tale. *Game Widow* pulls data from professional psychologists, lectures given at the Game Developers Conference and medical journals; her analysis of the game industry demonstrates more than a working knowledge of the subject. Most importantly, she tells a story and outlines a plan that's optimistic instead of defeatist. "I hope that by being brave enough to educate ourselves, have the tough conversations and change our habits, we game widows can pull ourselves together enough to join responsible game developers, educators, researchers and health professionals in dealing with our concerns and developing the future of videogames—and thus recapture a real world worth living in."

This then, is a fine resource. More to the point, it's an important read.



A husband is cured of his addiction...

"Parents, siblings, relatives and friends of obsessive gamers, whether or not there is an official, professional diagnosis of addiction, can't help but recognize the eerie similarity between the symptoms of drug use and behavioral addiction to videogames."
—Wendy Kays

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The Real Girl Gamers

And it's not what you think...

words Lesley Smith

Don't cross her.

"We girls have been gaming for years, but it is only recently that videogame publishers have started taking female gamers seriously..."

Girls and games: Those two words summon up images of booth babes, scantily clad fighters showing way too much flesh, pink consoles, Hello Kitty Online and DS games involving babies or cute pets. Alternatively, it can bring to mind images of Night Elves tearing chunks out of Orcs, Nariko wielding the Heavenly Sword, or the Frag Dolls showing boys how girls *really* play.

We girls have been gaming for years, but it is only recently that videogame publishers have started taking female gamers seriously—normally they segregate us into our own little demographic. However, the industry itself is also host to some passionate female gamers who have turned their lifelong love of videogames into a career.

Take British writer Rhianna Pratchett: She's been playing videogames since the ZX81 came out. After a stint as a videogame journalist, she moved into the world of videogame writing. She's best known for her work on Heavenly Sword, Overlord and the upcoming game Mirror's Edge, and she remains a passionate gamer.

"I've never been a male gamer. But to be honest, I don't really think of myself as a female gamer, for the same reason I don't think of myself as a female reader or a female moviegoer," she explains. "I think the industry is actually pretty receptive towards, let's call them, 'gamers who just so happen to be female,' and you're generally met with either pleasant surprise or indifference. As a female in the industry, especially if you have a profile, you sometimes get the usual boneheaded Internet-troll comments, but then that happens everywhere. It's life, really.

"It's not quite as mainstream as film and TV are, but yes, men and women can play any game regardless of genre or skill. Whether they want to is a completely different question. It's a matter of personal preference. One size never fits all. I think the industry has got somewhat of a handle on how to help young girls with little or no experience of games [get] into gaming. Ladies who already game don't need help, they're already there."

Walk into any Gamestop or Sam Goody and take a peek at the gaming section, and it's not hard to see that, like the industry's view of female gamers, females are still not on par with their male counterparts. Females are, for the most part, compartmentalized into their own demographic.

Passionate gamer Regina Buenaobra is a community manager for Arenanet, creators of the popular MMO Guild Wars. "I think the whole industry approaches women gamers with very narrow, stereotypical ideas of what women enjoy," she says. "This leads to game marketers believing that all women gamers prefer certain types of games. It's true that some women do like and will play stereotypically feminine games, and there is a market for that. But that's not the full story.

"Quite a lot of women gamers enjoy the same types of games male gamers like. The problem is that women are generally ignored when games are created and marketed," Buenaobra explains. "A woman who really enjoyed Gears of War will probably have an interest in purchasing Gears of War 2, even if she had problems with how women are portrayed or the lack of women represented in that game world. But because these women gamers will buy those games anyway, their voices are never heard. There's no impact on the bottom line."

Of course, manufacturers have started to cotton on to the vast numbers of women who enjoy gaming as much as men. Unfortunately this has led to a trend in pink consoles and distinctly "girly" games. Yes, everyone can play on the Wii and casual gaming is on the rise, but some publishers feel women still need reassurance with their own stereotypically colored gaming devices or titles. Is this a good thing?

"I think that some of these marketing tactics are misguided, but a step in the right direction," Buenaobra says. "Having consoles presented in colors that are traditionally feminine can allow non-gaming women and girls to see that gaming isn't the exclusive domain of men. A problem with games that are targeted to women and girl gamers is that these games are gendered in ways that present femininity in stereotypical and narrow ways. These 'girly' games probably make new women gamers think that those are the only kinds of games they should enjoy. There's nothing wrong with 'girly' games, because some women do enjoy them. The problem is that the vast majority of games are not marketed in ways that are inclusive to women and other marginalized groups. When game marketers are telling you that you're not important enough for them to advertise to, it alienates existing and potential customers."

"The videogame industry has definitely changed over the course of the past few years," says Negar Baharlou, senior brand manager for Ubisoft, one of the world's largest publishers of computer games. "With the huge success of the Nintendo Wii and the Nintendo DS, the market has opened itself up to girls and women like never before. Now we're seeing that videogame companies are beginning to recognize this trend and want to capitalize on this growing segment. Ubisoft was ahead of the curve with the Imagine brand, Petz and the new Ener-G titles. Women are beginning to become a target audience in regard to games, [whereas] in the past they were viewed as a niche market.

"Ubisoft saw a great opportunity to reach girls with games that were developed with them in mind. It wasn't just about making 'pink' games built on old game engines and game mechanics, but it was about building new games from the ground up. Girls can definitely play the same games as boys—in fact, Ubisoft is the sponsor of the Frag Dolls, the all-female professional videogame team."

The Frag Dolls debuted in 2005, and this group of feisty girl gamers soon inspired similar groups in the U.K. and France (where Ubisoft is based). Each member has a nickname inspired by her Gamertag, and many are professional gamers, industry members or journalists who compete in tournaments and have managed to dramatically raise the profile of female gamers. So how do they think female gamers are viewed by the industry? We asked Renelly Morel, better known as Psyche:

"I think in the past, the videogames industry ignored female gamers and has treated them as if they were in a field that they didn't belong," Morel says. "But recently more and more women have expressed their love for videogames, and having gaming teams and communities like the Frag Dolls helps other females see that it's okay for them to game.

The Frag Dolls have you in their sights.

"The Frag Dolls are multifaceted and one of the reasons is to promote the presence of females in the videogame industry. Although we are not the only ones who do so, it's nice for us to be a part of the female gamer movement. One of our goals is to empower those women who are as passionate about videogames as we are. Every time we see another female team at a tournament that we are attending, we always take the time to get to know them and wish them luck because it helps having that female support on your side. I feel that we're not sexy mascots at all. Our Frag Doll attire consists of a Frag Doll team T-shirt and a pair of jeans. We are real gamers who are all passionate about different types of games and that is what we want to represent, the genuine gamer."

Now, it's no surprise that as the industry starts to acknowledge female gamers, more and more strong lead characters will appear. These women are not eye candy, but heroines and figureheads in the same way that men have Masterchief, the Prince and numerous other male leads. Yes, we have Lara Croft, who started out as eye candy with unrealistically sized breasts, but as time has passed, the intelligence and characterization of women in videogames has increased with the number of polygons, and women are becoming endearing and strong characters in their own right.

"I think that strong and interesting female characters can work well because they are appealing to both genders. Okay, so this is a bit of a generalization, but I think men are less likely to be put off by playing a female avatar than women are by one of the many meatheaded, soldier-of-the-future male avatars that are out there," Rhianna Pratchett says. "You only have to look at the amount of guys playing Night Elves in World of Warcraft. There are always exceptions, though. Having said

Pink is for girls.

that, if the female avatar in question is dressed in an outfit that wouldn't fit in a Kinder Surprise egg and is sporting boobs that have their own gravitational field, then it may well put off women—and probably a few guys, too. Nevertheless, a great character, regardless of gender, can be appealing to everyone."

But, of course, it's important to remember that not every female gamer is a member of the industry or intends to be. Laurean Leigh, an art student who runs Beyond the Cameras Lens, a website devoted to Tecmo's Fatal Frame series, is a die-hard gamer and a woman. She is the epitome of the gamer the industry is trying to satisfy: someone who enjoys all kinds of games, including those the industry believes appeal more to men than to the fairer sex.

"I think calling attention to the female gaming community has helped and arguably hurt male gamers' perceptions of female gamers," she says. "I don't think it's so much about 'girl power!' or that women in gaming are special or rare and should be worshipped. Clearly, we're not rare. The main argument is, we're here, too, we love videogames and love to play them, so think about that when you're designing a new game, or if there just happens to be a female player on your FPS team. At the end of the day, being beaten by a girl is the same as being beaten by a guy—you still lost. So suck it up and use the opportunity to get better to win next time.

"Are girls treated differently from men? Well, considering all the attention in the media, you have to say yes. As far as being treated differently when playing a game, I have run into guys that think that way, and then others who don't. I've heard other girls mention that they've been 'targeted' on online play because they say they're a girl...then again, there are always going to be players—male and female—who are a pain to interact with on online play. Should female gamers be treated differently from male gamers? No. That's the point. Gaming should be about playing great videogames and enjoying them, regardless of your gender."

The Girls of Gaming

Gaming has more female leads than you might think (as demonstrated by *Play*'s sister publication *Girls of Gaming*). Some are eye candy, but as time goes on, these female leads are becoming icons in their own right. Join us as we take you through the evolution of gaming's female icons.

Chun Li Street Fighter II (1991)
No one kicks arse like Chun Li. She was one of the few female characters made available in early arcade co-ops and she still exists today. Right on, girl!

Lara Croft Tomb Raider (1996–present)
The face of girl gaming, this female Indiana Jones has brains, brawn and breasts. This year marks her ninth game; she's even starred in two of her own movies.

Heather Silent Hill 3 (2003)
Thrown into a nightmarish world, Heather is spunky and strong but belittled by a tongue-in-cheek magical girl sequence and overtly macho appearance.

Mio and Mayu Amakura Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly (2003)
Twin girls thrown into a nightmare of Japanese horror. Mio's photographic abilities and desire to save her sister are the only things that will save them from the Lost Village.

Nariko Heavenly Sword (2007)
Hated by her people, Nariko's destiny is death by the Heavenly Sword, which slowly sucks her life away as she tries to save her clan.

Elika Prince of Persia (2008)
Recently revealed at UbiDays, Elika is the Prince's new sidekick, whom he will need to complete the game. We're not quite sure if this is good or bad, but we're looking forward to finding out.

Faith Mirror's Edge (2009)
A courier in a dystopian future where communication is far from private, Faith is a striking free-running protagonist that we can't wait to meet.

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System: 360/PS3/Arcade | **Developer:** Capcom | **Publisher:** Capcom | **Available:** Unannounced

STREET FIGHTER IV

The return of the fighter...

words Heather Campbell

Hello. My name is Heather Campbell, and I am a Street Fighter III-aholic.

(Hello, Heather.)

My love for Street Fighter III is so intense that it's like I've been staring at something too bright for too long; the game has left after-images over every other title I've played. In the years since Third Strike's release, I've judged other fighting games by the Street Fighter-iness of their controls, and the inventiveness of their character set. You remember how passionate people were about Street Fighter II? The cult that grew around that game? My passion for Street Fighter III was equal to that, or greater. Evidence: It's been more than 10 years, and I still play Street Fighter III, weekly.

My initial reaction to Street Fighter IV was fear. And loathing. How dare Capcom make this game three-dimensional? How dare they throw away all of my beloved characters, as if Three never happened? I felt *embarrassed* by how much I felt *betrayed*. I mean, let's face it, these are videogames, and as passionate as we are about them, they're all just sticks and buttons.

And some really great ideas.

But, reader, I've been playing Street Fighter IV a lot lately. I know you haven't. My access to Street Fighter IV recalls the jealousy I felt reading early copies of *GameFan*; the lucky way games journalists got to play titles before me. It's strange, though. My exposure to this game has been different. It doesn't feel exclusive. I've played enough Street Fighter IV (and will in the next few weeks) that it feels like the game has already come out. I've been driving to Walnut, California, to play the cabinet on the gray market. I've played it at Captivate (Capcom's invitational event) and then at E3. I'm going to play it at the Tokyo Games Show, and then in Akihabara in the evenings.

And no, I'm not writing this to brag. I'm writing it to let you know that the article that follows is not some half-thought-out froth piece. This is another soldier in the army of Street Fighter IV articles I will be writing for *Play*.

Arriving at Capcom's San Mateo offices in late September, I knew that the first order of business was "The Big Reveal." You know from the cover that Sakura is going to be in the home edition of the game. Akuma, too. Same with Dan, and Fei Long, and...well, a few others. If you're a child of the Internet, you've seen images of Gouken by now—Ryu and Ken's master, rumored to be killed off by Akuma. There's a lot of stuff that's going to be in Street Fighter IV when it comes home.

The best way to get familiar with these new characters, obviously, was to play them. My sparring partner for the day was Seth Killian, EVO tournament player and organizer, member of the old Street Fighter Team USA, and author of several well-known Internet articles on the qualities a player must possess in order to dominate the competition. Unbeknownst to both of us, Killian and I grew up playing at the same arcades in Chicago, with some of the same friends in our Street Fighter circle.

"This is another soldier in the army of Street Fighter IV articles I will be writing for Play."

Killian works at Capcom now, and has been involved in the development of Street Fighter IV. His job is self-described as fan-employee, among other things, a defender of what the player wants.

He plays Street Fighter IV with an obsessive attention to detail. "I pushed for a number of changes. The largest one being the retooling of the entire collision system."

Killian sighs, looking both determined and embarrassed. Gamer pride tempered by self-awareness.

"The old collision system was based on the 3-D character models, and it reduced some of what I'd call 'pop'—the immediacy of the collisions. That's what's great about the 2-D games, you can map these really firm hit-boxes directly on the screen, and you don't get the sort of sluggishness of, you know, my elbow is over here, and my hit-box is rotating around, like in Tekken."

So Killian thought, "Just because we have these three-dimensional models doesn't mean there can't be 2-D collision."

Capcom went back to the drawing board. Pretty late in development. And now, Street Fighter IV feels like Street Fighter.

"Dhalsim was one of the things that grabbed me about the original game. He gave me lots of different ways to think about the game, in terms of space on the screen, and controlling it."

"That was a lot of work for a fairly esoteric kind of complaint...but I knew it would make a difference. Longtime Street Fighter fans are able to feel it pretty quickly."

He smiles, adding, "Hopefully, that kind of attention will pay off...or I'll be fired. Or not invited to the next meeting."

That's the kind of player-employee Killian is. And it's the reason Street Fighter IV's final boss is named after him.

We sit down and play Sakura vs. Akuma bouts for an hour or so. Sakura hasn't aged since Street Fighter Alpha III; she's still wearing her schoolgirl *fuku*. Her art is a little boyish, but Killian tells me it's not final. She plays great, with lengthy and involved combos, mischievous off-balance stops and her trademark running Shoryuken. Fanboys will be happy to know that her Ultra move shows off a lot more than her fighting prowess, if you know what I mean.

Akuma remains devastating, as always. His EX air fireball blasts out two flames in one leap, and his Ultra move is the Raging Demon. It's unknown whether his ground-pounding Super from Third Strike will be returning, but with months left before the home release, anything is possible.

We're playing on prototypes of the Madcatz joysticks. They feel solid, technical.

"There are two variations on the sticks: a high-end model and a more budget-conscious model," says Killian. "Basically it's 10-plus years of building sticks myself, and watching other people who are better at it building them. It's sorta...stealing all their ideas. Seth in the game is sort of a move vampire. Seth the stick builder is trying the same trick. We're going to try and suck up all the best techniques from the best joysticks and put them in a commercial model."

Though I love the purity of joysticks-and-Street Fighter, Killian adds that there will be some new pads available, too. A shame, I think. Everyone should be *forced* to play Street Fighter with sticks.

The early 360 build is a little slower than the cabinet, but there's still so much left to work on that I'm not nervous for a second. This is Street Fighter, after all. Capcom isn't going to bring out a broken home version. Other than that, nothing from the arcade version is visually different. Same with the play itself. Really, *nothing at all*. The Internet videos of infinite combos? They're still in the home edition.

Killian clarifies: "Things like El Fuerte's infinite combo, frankly, shouldn't even be regarded as a problem. When El Fuerte starts winning all the tournaments, then we'll be worried about it. But that's not really what's happening.

"Part of the fun of Street Fighter is finding the broken, abusive stuff—it's dangerous, it's powerful techniques. If the game boils down to just doing the same thing over and over again, maybe that's a problem. But we're going to see what the players do with it. We're not worried about it right now."

We branch out and play general Street Fighter IV matches for four or five hours straight. Sometimes we go back to Akuma and Sakura. Sometimes we play on the arcade cabinets in the same room. I've got a terrible fever, but try not to mention it as the rounds continue. Sometimes I even forget that I'm sick. Then I secretly throw up in the Capcom bathroom. I don't say anything, because I don't want it to sound like an excuse for losing.

Besides, I'm having so much fun. And this isn't even Street Fighter III. In comparison to Street Fighter III, Killian believes IV is more immediate. He echoes a lot of what we've heard about Street Fighter IV's entry-level play. "If you want to point to a problem in Street Fighter III, it's that the barrier to fun is a lot higher than it needs to be," he says.

"A lot of the elements in Street Fighter IV open the door to fun earlier, without sacrificing much in the way of strategy. [Street Fighter III] was really hard for a lot of casual players to pick up and play. The parry system, to use effectively, was challenging.

"One of the lessons from Street Fighter II—there's a lot of depth in Street Fighter—but there's nothing that should take you six months before you pick up and play it."

Killian selects Dhalsim and continues to kick my ass. I get in a few matches here and there, but it's obvious who is the better player.

"My favorite character from the entire series is probably Dhalsim," says Killian. "Ryu and Guile are probably my favorite character designs, but Dhalsim was one of the things that grabbed me about the original game. He gave me lots of different ways to think about the game, in terms of space on the screen and controlling it. Locking people down, and how to get a lot out of it. He seems like a really bad character the first time you see him, and you think there's no way this guy could win, but he ends up being one of the best characters."

Killian teleports and traps me with a Yoga Flame Ultra combo. It takes me a couple of matches just to be able to avoid it.

"There was a lot of concern, early on, 'Is this easy mode? Is this baby Street Fighter?'" He shakes his head. "Just from the videos I watch online,

all the time, *uhhhh, no*. It's not."

Besides, "even simple Street Fighter is harder than 90% of the games out there. It's a challenging game, right?"

Yes, it is.

But it's only as challenging as your opponent. One of my greatest fears is translating the game to an online battle. I've played Street Fighter online. It's not Street Fighter.

Killian agrees. But, he says, "We've really come a long way with Street Fighter HD remix. Hopefully some of those advancements will benefit Street Fighter IV as well. With HD Remix, online, you can actually play it. It's Street Fighter-like. It's a game you want to play again, as opposed to...you know, throwing the controller because you were just beaten by someone who did 100 Hand Slap for 99 seconds."

Maybe it'll have something to do with the slight lethargy of the game's commands. Says Killian, "The input windows on Street Fighter IV are a little looser. It's somewhat easier to do special moves. The window is wider by a frame or two."

Again, that's not to say Street Fighter IV is simple, or easy. There's a lot of depth because the games that IV are built on have such a solid foundation. The game includes classic characters because there's still more to get out of them.

"Chun-Li, Ryu and Ken are all a little bit closer to their Street Fighter III incarnations. A lot of the other ones are closer to Street Fighter II. They didn't have to go out and reinvent the wheel. They had a lot of respect for the core mechanic."

What's more, getting rid of the parry wasn't dumbing Street Fighter down. It was stripping the game bare, getting back to the skeleton of it. "Fireballs are back in Street Fighter IV. Street Fighter III had a lot of great mechanics, but one thing I didn't like about Street Fighter III is that it sacrificed some of what SF was uniquely good at: providing effective ways of attacking from across the screen, instead of only really fighting next to one another, like a Virtua Fighter or Tekken," Killian says. "SFIII was good in a sort of different way, but not in a way that was totally unique to Street Fighter. The fight went from full-screen to face-to-face."

In Street Fighter IV, "you can kind of parry the fireballs; suck them up with a Focus attack, and then dash-cancel, as long as it's not an EX Fireball." A functional parry, though with a much more complicated command. There's more risk, too. "If you dash the wrong way, or get hit—it's not foolproof. You can't just parry fireballs at a distance.

"To me, the high-end game has never been about [complicated commands]. The essence of Street Fighter is out-thinking each other. Knowing the opponent. It's about gambits and mind games and that kind of business."

Still, there's a lot of technical depth going on behind the curtains. Killian expounds, "One of the things I really like right now about Street Fighter IV is that the damage scaling is such that, even if you're pulling off the world's craziest combo, and doing two EX moves into a Focus cancel into an Ultra or something, you're only going to pick up 10 or 15% more damage than somebody who's just playing it pretty straight."

He adds, "there's incentive for high levels of execution, but it's not required to stay on the same playing field.

"I think Street Fighter IV is going to be one of the best Street Fighters in this regard—there's plenty of room for advanced execution and crazy vistas of unbelievable feats of technical skill. But you don't have to be doing that to stay in the ring. If you know how to out-think your opponent, or you know what I'm going to do next and how to capitalize on it, or get out of the way, then you're going to be winning matches."

Killian and I are coming to the end of the day. I flew into San Francisco that morning, and will be flying out that evening. Even with Walnut, California, only an hour or so away from my home, I know it'll be a few days before I'll get to play Street Fighter IV again. Though the game has been available to me for the last six months or so, I haven't gotten tired of it.

But will I be at the machine in 10 years?

Will I need a Street Fighter IV support group?

Killian considers the nature of long-lived games. "Well, I admit the first players of SFII aren't playing that anymore, and the same with III—it's the later iterations that perfected the magic formula. Those are the games that became classics for over a decade. They get played in a way that you don't see other games getting played.

"Most people who are playing 10- or 15-year-old games are playing them out of nostalgia or, 'Ha-ha, remember the '80s?' The people who are still playing Street Fighter aren't playing it out of hilariousness. They're super-serious about it. They're still picking out new things that people never really thought of and because it's a great game that's still fun, exciting and full of surprises even after over a decade of hardcore play."

Obviously, most Street Fighter games go through revisions. But Street Fighter IV has a robust engine already in place. Killian smiles, "I don't know if IV is the final evolution of this mechanic, but it's a great new beginning. It has the potential to have that sort of longevity."

I can tell already.

Hello, my name is Heather Campbell, and I am a Street Fighter IV-aholic.

(Hello, Heather.)

INTERVIEW Yoshinori Ono, Producer, Street Fighter IV

Interview by Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama / Transcribed by Dai Kohama / Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: Thanks so much for sitting down with us today. I know you've been asked this question countless times, but for the record, why resurrect Street Fighter now?
Yoshinori Ono: Originally, the feeling here at Capcom was that Street Fighter III had hit the apex of the fighting game, and that there was really no taking the series any further than that. Also, the market for fighting games—or maybe I should say fighting tools—was continuing to shrink. It's true that Sega and Namco were trying hard, continuing to release new versions of their games, but we were watching the situation and knew it wouldn't expand the market. We felt a little sad about that... and Street Fighter's 20th anniversary was coming up. Since we didn't really do anything for the 15th anniversary, a feeling started to emerge at Capcom that we should create a new game. But there were clashing views—the market didn't want gameplay more advanced than SFIII, so what should we do? We started to look at it in a different way: What if we made something everyone could enjoy? Started over? We thought that approach would be worth a try, and it was the start of the SFIV project.

Street Fighter was a phenomenon that took the world by storm. Do you think SFIV can or will bring the series back to that kind of relevance?
Rather than take by storm, I'd say we want to... We're looking at the SFII fans with this. In the SFIII scene, it doesn't matter if you're a gamer, it doesn't matter how hardcore you are. To use a Japanese analogy, you can't even compete unless you're on the level of a shogi master like Yoshiharu Habu 2. SFIII was denying people the ability to play shogi with their grandchildren. During the age of SNES and Genesis, everyone could play Street Fighter together. There are Street Fighter experts, of course, but we wanted to be able to release something that would blur those lines. SFIII may have shown the world the pinnacle of fighting games, but to be honest... we don't think people who played SFII casually even knew there was an SFIII. When I was touring the US, I actually heard people say, "What?! How can there be a Street Fighter IV?!" With notions like that out there, my goal became making something people could easily pick up and play, without even reading the manual—like a pack of playing cards. Rather than create a worldwide fighting game phenomenon, we want to say, "Look, here's a new shogi board. Here's a new chess board." If we can get people to think of SFIV in that sense, I think the series will keep its longevity.

How are the 360 and PS3 ports going?
It's tough (laughs)! I suppose they're going smoothly, but... the home versions can't show any flaws. We have to locate and fix small bugs reported in the arcade version, that's one thing. The other is that the two machines have completely different architectures. SFIV is built with a common engine, but the final rendering is done differently. That's giving us a lot of headaches right now.

Any differences between the two platforms?
Other than tiny elements that will differ because of Sony and Microsoft's APLs, we'll be releasing the exact same thing on both platforms. The rendering, color output, gameplay, characters... everything will be the same. We want to make SFIV like a board game you can play on any board, anywhere.

Will the PS3 version feature hard drive installation?
The stability of the PS3 hard drive isn't quite at a level where we at Capcom are satisfied with it, but if Sony can fix a few things we'd like to be able to add HDD installation.

Is it a technical issue with the PS3's hard drive?
I'm not an engineer, so I don't know the specifics. But as things stand now, from a stability standpoint, we don't think we should attempt HDD installation.

Will we be looking at comparable loading times on both versions?
We were thinking about console loading when we designed the pre-fight sequences for the arcade game, so we think both versions will be very comparable.

Let's talk about the home versions' online play. In America, arcades are virtually dead. It's safe to say the only way people will be able to face a variety of opponents will be online. Are you being very particular about your netcode?
We're very focused on it. However, there are always the technical problems of latency and line speed. When we gun the engines on our packets we can move them very fast, but America is huge. For instance, what if someone on the east coast has a great net connection, but their opponent in the middle of the country doesn't? We can't increase physical line speed, so we're thinking about how to provide stress-free matches in that environment. The question is: Do we still match people up if we know they have different line speeds? Or do we match people with fast connections together? We want to provide the best matches possible for everyone, so the development team is considering these questions as they build the user interface right now.

Does SFIV use the same netcode as Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD? We've heard it's very good.
It's actually completely different netcode. We originally thought we could use the same code for both games, but the load on the CPU is tremendous. SSFIITHD only puts a tiny load on the CPU and GPU, so they're able to use the rest of the console's processing power to run netcode. In SFIV's case, however, we're close to maxing out performance even offline, so there was no way to implement their program's so-called "rollback" code. The development team is exploring other options for stress-free online pay right now.

We know the home version will have original characters—we've seen Fei-Long, Sakura and Dan so far. How were those characters chosen? How many total original characters can we expect?
By the time this interview appears in print, Tokyo Game Show will be over and we'll have announced several new characters. But that's not all—there will be even more in the final game (laughs). As for how we chose those particular characters, basically... the development team has their own motivations, and I have my motivation as a producer. For me, a lot of that motivation came from speaking to the media. For instance, whenever I did interviews—say, an Onimusha interview—at the end I would always be asked, "This doesn't have anything to do with Onimusha... but when are you doing another Street Fighter?" (laughs)

I know how they felt.
It was the same thing every interview I did, even on Shadow of Rome. It always happened to me. I once mentioned it to Keiji Inafune, who did Mega Man and Dead Rising, and he said "Me too! They always ask me at the end!" (laughs) It happened a lot in America especially. So what we tried to do when we were making the arcade version of SFIV was poll Capcom USA, and also Capcom UK, Germany, Korea... take all their marketing opinions and design the game based on that. We took the same approach for the console versions, and had marketing do research. We'd hear "People really like so-and-so," or "This character is still really popular," or "This character got selected the most in Marvel VS. Capcom 2," things like that. We had marketing do a fan vote in San Diego, and Cammy was #1, Akuma #2. We took that popularity data back to Japan, and decided to implement characters as high as possible on the list that would fit within SFIV's balance tiers. We want to include the characters fans really want.

Will any of the home version characters be DLC?
No. If we sold DLC characters, the rules between people who bought them and those that didn't would change. For a long time now, Namco has had different versions of their games with Spawn and Link and so on... that may be their policy, but my policy is, this is a board game. If all the players aren't using the same rule book, tiers would change and it would be unfair. I won't say there will be no DLC whatsoever... we are thinking about various possibilities. But as far as characters go, we won't have anything like, "I bought Yoda, now I can use him."

That's a refreshing approach. But let me ask you this—was there any resistance or concern about mixing cartoony Alpha characters like Sakura and Dan into the rather spartan main series?
Well, the most basic concept for SFIV—this fighting tool—is that we want grandparents to be able to pick it up and play it with their grandchildren. It's about knowing the rules without reading them... for instance, you're up at bat, you have two strikes. You already know you're out unless you hit that third pitch, right? That's what we were looking for... rules people already knew. That meant characters from up to SSFIIT, or early in the Alpha series... whoever was the easiest to use and the most popular. We want people to be able to play without studying the rules—in chess, you don't have to think about how to move a knight or a bishop. For us, that meant choosing from the SFII or Alpha series was best, so there was no resistance among the team.

Is that why SFIV takes place earlier in the timeline than SFIII? Was it planned to be that way from the beginning of the project?
From the very beginning. Actually, I've thought of the game as Super Street Fighter II Turbo II ever since we started the project three and a half years ago (laughs).

Two Turbo Two?!
To be honest, what I really wanted to make was Street Fighter II Championship Edition II (laughs). In terms of positioning, that's when Street Fighter was the most fun, right? From Turbo on, the game became so fast that people in their 30s and 40s couldn't possibly play it. Making a sequel to that has always been our real intention with SFIV.

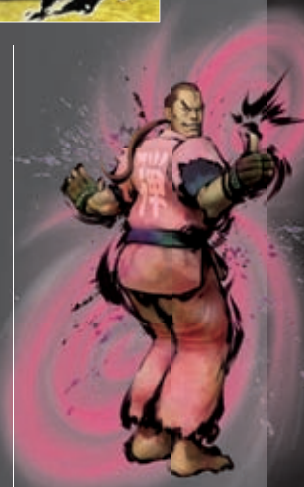
While we're on the topic of home version characters, can you tell us why Sakura is still wearing her high school uniform several years after she must have graduated (laughs)?
For the answer to that, well... please play the game and watch the cutscenes (laughs).

You must have had dozens of scrapped ideas for the four new arcade characters. Is there any chance you might resurrect some of them as all-new home version characters?
First, we did have a lot of scrapped designs. A mountain of them, because by the time we announced the game we'd been working on it for almost two years. During that time our art director was designing lots of characters, but they weren't... they wouldn't fit in SFIV. Our first thought was to create new characters that were completely different from anyone in II or III, but the designs were just too polished, too sophisticated. Street Fighter has a certain unrefined quality, so the highly polished designs just sort of disappear. To answer your question, we had several runner-up designs for the four new characters, but there are no plans right now to include them in the console versions. Even with just four new characters, there are now more rules. If we keep adding pages to the rule book, it will be like when Capcom released SFIII—your first impression was "The only character I know here is Ryu, what am I supposed to do with all these people?" For real hard core gamers, discovering what to do with new characters is fun. But for people who enjoyed the series up to SFII, new characters mean that they won't know how to read their opponent. They'll have no idea how to play rock-paper-scissors with them. I don't think that's very fair, so there aren't any plans to increase the rule book any further right now.

A few more questions about characters, and we'll move on. By the time SFIV takes place, M. Bison is dead... how can it be that he appears in this game?
I wonder how much I should tell you (laughs).

Is it part of SFIV's story?
Yes, it is. In the arcade version ending that fans in Japan and Asia can see right now, there's a bit of a hint, but no real answer. That answer will become clear in the home versions. You'll find out why he's still around, and when you do, you'll definitely think, "Oh yeah, that's the Bison I know."

What about SFIV's final boss, Seth? He looks a lot like SFIII's final boss, Gill, and uses similar moves. Is there a connection?
I can't say there's no connection, but I can't say there is one, either. Right now, Seth himself doesn't know if he has any connection to anyone. The truth of his origins is something we might draw out until Street Fighter V. Up until now, the story backbone for each Street Fighter has been very different,



and it was difficult to keep everything consistent. When we began the IV project, we decided that it should have has much consistency as possible. IV is like the glue that connects the entire Street Fighter story together, so if the fans look at the story through Seth's eyes, I think they'll be able to do a lot of speculating.

My last character question—you previously hinted that Gouken would finally show up in SFIV, and he was officially announced last week. Talk a little about that.
Many years ago, EGM did that April Fool's joke about "Sheng Long." I think someone from Capcom asked, "Do you really want 'Sheng Long' in the game?" and all the fans on the Capcom website said, "That would be awesome! Do it!" The response was really overwhelming. Since this is the 20th anniversary, and ten years after SFIII, we thought we'd put him in the game as a gift to the fans. We did one last April Fool's this year, claiming that he'd be in the game on our website (laughs).

But it turned out to be true, didn't it (laughs). Moving on, a lot of fans feel that the arcade version doesn't have a lot of stage variety—there are half as many stages as there are characters. Will new stages appear in the console versions?
There will be new stages. People think there aren't enough, don't they? Our opinion is... rather than give each character their own stage, we squeezed them down on purpose. Instead of a "trip around the world" feel, we thought it would be better to compress the backgrounds into stages that fit the world and situations of SFIV. That let us focus on characters and effects, but I suppose some fans feel there should be more.

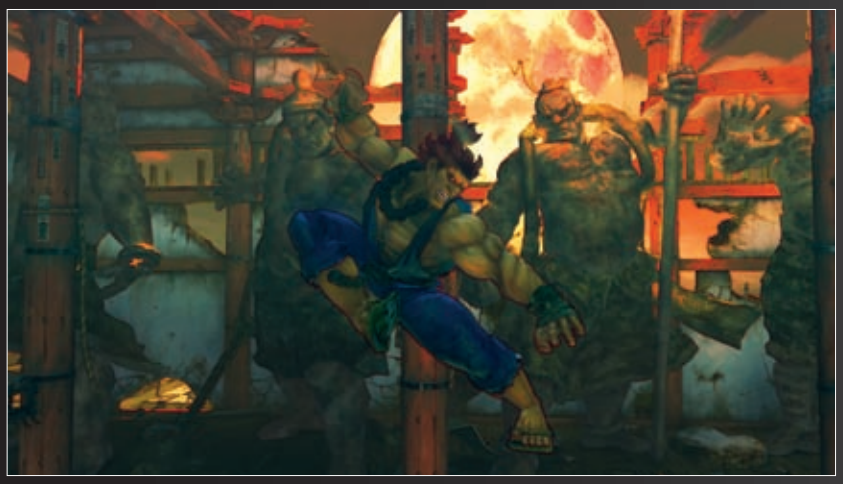
In the arcade version of SFIV, players buy new colors and extra costumes with "Zenny" that they earn by playing the game. Will Zenny be in the home versions? How will you earn it?
That's, uh... we're kind of going back and forth with Capcom USA about that right now (laughs). Please wait until we can announce something. In the arcade version, Zenny is basically real money, isn't it? You get Zenny by putting your ¥100 coins in the cabinet. We really have to think about how to bring the Zenny system to consoles without it being unfair to anyone—arcade players or console players. How will we make the extra costumes available in the home versions? We're still pondering that.

Putting aside for the moment how they might be unlocked, are you thinking about original costumes for the home versions?
We aren't thinking about original costumes yet. If we have the time, we'll do them, but... at this point we really don't have any time to spare. If the fans really want new costumes we might add them, but right now our hands are completely full with the port.

The "System Direction" mode in home versions of SFIII: 3rd Strike, which allowed players to completely refashion the gameplay to their liking, was very popular. Are there any plans to implement such a mode in SFIV?
Not right now. If we added System Direction, it would utterly change the rules. Fans in the West will be playing SFIV for the first time, so we want them to be able to start at the same level. We want everyone to be able to begin with the same rule book just as soon as they turn on the power—not having to think about anything. It is possible that we might add a System Direction mode in a future update, but right now we want people to compete on an equal plane.

How about character endings? They're fairly spare in the arcade—will they be beefed up at home?
We're not exactly beefing up the endings... we're beefing up what comes before them. We'll be announcing a lot of supplemental story features for the home versions soon, so please wait for them.

There have been a lot of rumors on the internet that claim SFIV wasn't developed by Capcom at all, but by DIMPS. Can we get the real story?
I was asked this question at Comic-Con, too. It's completely true that we brought DIMPS in on SFIV; they're a very able developer. The Capcom side did planning and engineering, Daisuke Ikeno did all of the design. Capcom lent DIMPS the designers they needed, and engineers to do fine-tuning. They're in Osaka, too, so that's how we built the SFIV team.



Thanks for clearing that up. Changing gears, tell us about SFIV's art style. How long did it take to arrive at the final look? What was it like building an original engine to emulate 2-D illustrations, and how did you use shader technology to do so?
When we first began this project, we were really worried about the visuals. Our initial vision was what a sequel to SFII might look like today—the "Super Street Fighter II Turbo II" I was talking about earlier. Let's use a class reunion as an example... There's a cute girl in class everyone imagines will be a total knockout in ten years, right? But you see her again at the reunion and it's a huge disappointment. We wanted to make that ideal beauty everyone imagined ten years ago. If you asked me what was so amazing about SFI and II all those years ago, I'd say it was that the games looked like moving art. People call it pixel work now, but back then it really looked like illustration. So, we decided to pursue making illustrations move with today's technology—but how to approach it? We talked about drawing everything frame by frame again, but that wasn't inspiring. Once we decided to think about how we could use the latest 3-D technology to make art move, the first thing we created was the "ink" trailer with Ryu and Ken.

That trailer was incredible.
It really was the very first thing we did—we called it the "test trailer." It set the tone for the project. Of course, we realized that no game could actually play like that... you wouldn't be able to tell what was a punch, and what was an effect. When it came time to "encode" those visuals as a real game, but still appear as moving illustration, what would it look like? The answer we arrived at is what you see now. With visuals like these, the fans who played SFII fifteen years ago in the arcade will know at a glance, "it's a new SFII!" It's fine if they don't think of it as something completely new—we decided it would be best if people recognized it as a new SFII game. With regards to our shader technology, when we started the project, our internal teams—the Lost Planet and Dead Rising teams—were specializing in photo-real visuals. As development continued, the Devil May Cry 4 team was also doing realistic visuals, and I think Resident Evil 5 has some of the finest photorealistic visuals in the world. However, for this project, we needed shaders designed for a completely different purpose. Instead of displaying the way light passes naturally through skin, we needed to "lie", and show the false way light falls in illustration. I told our engineers to spend a lot of time programming the game to capture that matte finish illustration has. For the animation, we didn't want "live action"-style movements; it had to look 2-D. The speed at which punches occur is completely unreal, and it appears two

dimensional.

The effect is really quite something. I was relieved when I finally played the game... although the initial trailer was stunning, I was worried SFIV might be going completely 3-D.
We argued with our bosses until the last minute before releasing that footage; Mr. Inafune really wanted to show it. When it came time to announce the game publicly, I said there was nothing we could show yet, but Mr. Inafune told me, "You have the test trailer!" I was worried it would give people the wrong impression—make them say "This is a betrayal! They made Street Fighter 3-D!" My fears came true, of course (laughs). Mr. Inafune was amazing—his opinion was that the trailer would spur discussion among the fan community, and that they'd be astonished when they saw the real thing at the AOU Show in February.

I want to take it back to art for a moment—during an interview I had for the .hack//GU series, I was told a very interesting story. The character designer for .hack, Yoshiyuki Sadamoto, said that 3-D is too honest. A 2-D animator has complete freedom to draw something that would logically be hidden in three dimensional space, if it looks better that way. It seems to me that SFIV was built with the same philosophy—bending three dimensional rules to look better on a flat plane.
Oh, it's exactly as Mr. Sadamoto says—if you build things in 3-D normally they're just too straightforward. For instance, if you model Ryu's face to look like Akira Yasuda draws him, changing the angle breaks the illusion of "coolness." This is simply because Mr. Yasuda selected one angle, and drew him to look cool that way. To bring that style into SFIV, we had to change how light hit the models from every angle, selectively alter how shaders were applied, and make sure the camera never chooses an angle that causes Ryu's face to lose its "Ryu-ness." When other developers see SFIV, like at GDC, they tell us SFIV is really well done. But for the average user, we don't want them to think this is anything special—we just want them to see the camera moving naturally around that beautiful Ryu and Chun-Li they remember. If the average user is able to play the game and get that old feeling, even with all the camera movement—"All right! M. Bison's next!"—I think we'll have succeeded.

For this art style, that would probably be the ultimate success.
We heard a lot of complaints during our location tests—"It looks stupid whenever the angle changes," or "Chun-Li isn't cute." After the final game was released, we stopped hearing those opinions. Some people think that not receiving praise is sad, but in this case I feel that the ultimate praise is not receiving praise—we were able to tell effective 2-D lies using 3-D technology.

"The inspiration was a single phrase—'cool beauty.'"

You mentioned Akira "Akiman" Yasuda. He's no longer a Capcom employee, but did you ever consider hiring him to design for the SFIV project freelance?
We did consider him at the beginning of the project, but we also felt that we had to bring Street Fighter into a new age. I discussed this extensively with Mr. Inafune and Jun Takeuchi, the Resident Evil 5 producer. SFIII was the most recent Street Fighter game, so we felt that people would be used to seeing Ikeno's art. We also felt it best that Capcom bring the series into the present. Mr. Yasuda's art is his own, and for the people that enjoyed his work during the SFII era, there's plenty of merchandise available. They'll also be able to see his work in the upcoming Street Fighter movie. To return to the class reunion analogy, I thought using Ikeno would be the best, most precise way to bring back visuals everyone was familiar with in a beautiful way.

Looking at current fighting games, one gets the impression that buxom beauties are an essential component of the genre. Did you feel any pressure to bring that element into SFIV?
We did worry about that at the beginning. We had to design new characters for the arcade version, but we just couldn't make up our minds, so... we thought maybe we should put a big-breasted girl in the game, try to make an impact with that kind of eroticism. But it just wasn't Street Fighter. We tried a lot of designs, and nothing worked together with the unrefined, macho aesthetic the series has. We tried our hardest... the furthest we could take it was C. Viper. She was the limit. We thought stopping at that level would be the right thing for the Street Fighter universe.

I'm very fond of C. Viper's design. What was the inspiration for the character?
The inspiration was a single phrase—"cool beauty." The American side told us we absolutely needed a character that fit the phrase... Street Fighter was missing coolness and beauty. We tried pursuing the cool, but she got too cool for Street Fighter (laughs). Making her too beautiful wouldn't fit, either, so we decided to make her mysterious. We wanted to make Viper feel like a spy and have people wondering, "How can she jump like that? She's not Blanka, how can she use those electric shocks?". We used words like "mystery" and "secret agent," arriving at her design pretty naturally.

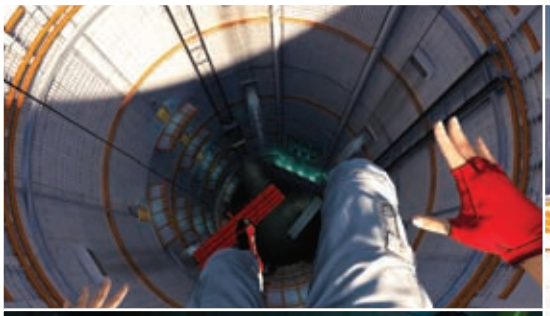
I ask you because it's impressive how Viper manages to fit right in to Street Fighter, while not being very Street Fighter at all.
She was actually the very first character Ikeno designed for SFIV. Wouldn't you think someone very Street Fighter-looking like Abel would be the first? (laughs)

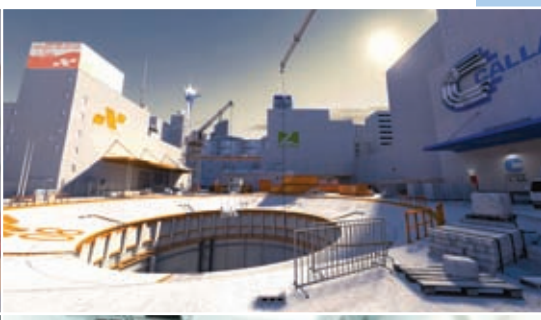
System: Windows, PS3, Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Digital Illusions CE (DICE) | **Publisher:** EA | **Available:** November 11

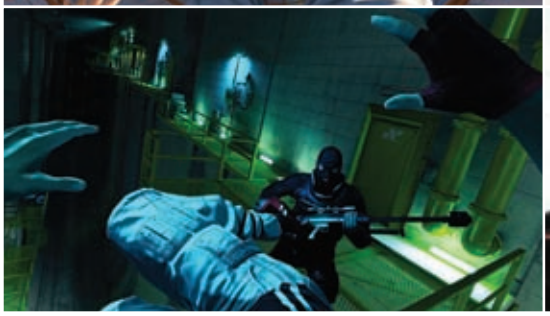
Mirror's Edge

In-person gaming is born

words Dave Halverson







I hate to say "I told you so," but I've been preaching about putting the "person" into first-person action games and shooters since the first swinging arm darkened gaming's doorstep… That's how I was going to open my Mirror's Edge preview (although I just did anyway) until I walked into Brady's office—our resident FPS lover and fan of the biological intelligent self-motivated floating arm—and saw him ogling the new Resistance 2 like it was something other than a floating arm shooting the same aliens as the last floating arm surrounded by a bunch of meat puppets (aka a squad) stupid enough to run at giant, armed saber-toothed aliens. Brady's played Mirror's Edge and still thinks this is a perfectly good way to spend (another) $60. Chances are so do you, which kind of makes me the odd man out. Nevertheless, I see Mirror's Edge as one giant leap for first-person kind. This is how all first-person games should be made, although come to think of it, that wouldn't change the fact that most of them are thematic variations on the same principal formula. So I'm going to open (ignore that first part now) my Mirror's Edge preview by saying that DICE *hasn't* built a better first-person game; they've created a new breed of action-adventure game that looks and feels like nothing that's come before it…the first "in-person" game.

That said, Mirror's Edge isn't at all what I expected. I anticipated a point-to-point conventional mission-based platforming game, somewhat like Crackdown, only white, with less killing and sporting a superhot Asian girl that I'd get to ogle between missions back at my (her) apartment. Runners in a dystopian society used to transmit messages while evading government surveillance? I mean, c'mon, seemed pretty open and shut. I was at least partially right. Faith definitely does her share of "platforming," but more often than not she's running for her life. Quick reactions and thinking on your feet (her feet) at a full sprint are non-negotiable skills punishable by death in Mirror's Edge, at least in the two levels provided in our demo, in which we're introduced to Faith; the corrupt government that her parents demonstrated against and were therefore killed; Mercury, the voice in Faith's head guiding her into and out of harm's way; and Faith's policewoman sister, whose unexpected guest happens to be a VIP slumped over in a pool of his own blood.

In Faith's line of work, jumping, sliding, shimmying, vaulting, tumbling and wall running are as second nature as pressing a button to you and me, which is why that's all you ever have to do. The controls in Mirror's Edge are as simple as can be differentiated by pointing up or down—momentum and timing are your enemies. Your only means of navigation as bullets whisk by your velvety tattooed visage are the voice inside your head (when you can make it out) and the colors that come into view against the stark white cityscape depicting unlocked doors, ramps, pipes and other such means of getting the heck out of harm's way. How you get to them, however, is largely up to you—the most efficient route being the toughest—and don't expect a road map or any cushion. "Reaction Time" is your only crutch, but the only way to get it is by playing well, so suck it up. By the time Mercury says it, you better be doing it, and the visual cues are meant to be vague. That's DICE pushing you to become a master Runner.

There's no easy way in Mirror's Edge, just different degrees of hard, until it clicks. At first you will plummet to your death in trial-and-error purgatory, but replaying an area once you've been through it, you begin to get a sense of what Mirror's Edge is all about: an in-body out-of-body experience, and quite frankly, there is nothing like it. All the times you've uttered "What a rush" up to this point were bullshit; *this* is a rush. Faith is also adept at disarming and/or kicking the shit out of the assholes shooting at her, provided she can get close enough, and the combat is as Neo-tastic as the running. She can jump-kick high or slide in and kick for the groin or disarm a mofo and pop a cap in their sorry ass in one fell swoop, although killing isn't what Faith or the game is all about. It's way cooler to disarm and disable, toss the gun and keep running.

To be fair, there were times in the first two acts to take five and admire the work that's gone into creating the world around you—which may be a beautiful white on the outside but glimmers with color on the inside—and I hope there are many more, because this is the most beautiful open-world game I have ever laid eyes on, and one of the most artistic too—it's a bona-fide work of art. It's also a real testament to the technology of the day, especially the PS3, where the game runs silky smooth. The Xbox 360 build was plagued by rampant screen tearing with every turn of the camera and wasn't nearly as fluid, so this may be the first chink in the 360's armor, although I hope it was just the early state of this particular build. It would be a shame for 360 owners to get a lesser version of such a breakthrough game. You've also got to admire the inverse nature of the game's cinemas, which shatter convention. Rather than the cut-scenes looking superior to the in-game tech, DICE do them in Flash at a level just above your average Esurance commercial. The only problem: We may never see Faith's beautiful face as it's been depicted on many a magazine cover—including our own—and advertisement. We also don't see much of her body. Her point of view begins below her chest and so far there are no in-game cut-scenes. Then again, the game is called *Mirror's* Edge; it can't be long until she's standing in front of one. I'll be counting the days, if not the minutes, on this one.

"The controls in Mirror's Edge are as simple as can be differentiated by pointing up or down—momentum and timing are your enemies."

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System: Xbox 360, PS3 later | **Developer:** Square Enix | **Publisher:** Square Enix | **Available:** November 20

The Last Remnant

Or, a Final Fragmency

words Heather Campbell

After the anticlimactic release of Infinite Undiscovery, the excitement over Square Enix's next new original IP seemed to cool. Disappointment can be contagious, and we knew so little about The Last Remnant until recently that some gamers had already dismissed it. Hopefully, the next couple of pages will get their blood pumping again—because spending just a few hours with The Last Remnant has rekindled my desire to really play the hell out of the game.

From the dark character designs to the mature and violent combat to the clear dignity of the voice acting, it looks like The Last Remnant will not be another misstep for SE. The combat may be turn-based, but Square reps are hasty to point out that this is not another JRPG. It's what they'd like to call a "World RPG." What this means, roughly, is Western-focused gameplay elements with Japanese artistic sensibilities, accompanied by a roaring and graceful soundtrack by Tsuyoshi Sekito, an SE veteran.

The basic core story follows our dark-haired, energetic hero named Rush, who is tracking down

his sister, Irina. After Rush stumbles upon a large battle, he is aided in his search by the Marquis of Athlum, a fellow named David Nassau. (Final Fantasy XII fans may like to know that The Last Remnant's voice director has dropped the alternate pronunciation of "marquis" that littered the XII acting track in favor of, well, a correct pronunciation.) David is accompanied by four great generals, and together they form the key characters of the story.

These Unreal Engine adventurers live in a world cluttered with ancient magic weapons known as Remnants. Sometimes giant, sometimes tiny, these objects contain untold powers and are traditionally used by villages as a source of protection. As the game begins, The Conqueror (buddy, you might want to look into something less sinister to disguise your intentions) has begun seeking out Remnants for more nefarious reasons…and perhaps Rush's sister has something to do with it. Makes sense. After all, these two children are the offspring of famous Remnant researchers.

The game is a single-player experience, but with so many troops at your command, it often feels like something much larger. Instead of parties formed of just a few people, The Last Remnant uses squads of combatants, called unions, with battles swelling to 70 unique individuals. Players issue commands to the unions, in turn-based style, and can view how the commands will be interpreted by each individual member of the squad. And unlike most JRPGs, all of the enemies you encounter are visible onscreen at all times—like an MMO, or Final Fantasy XII.

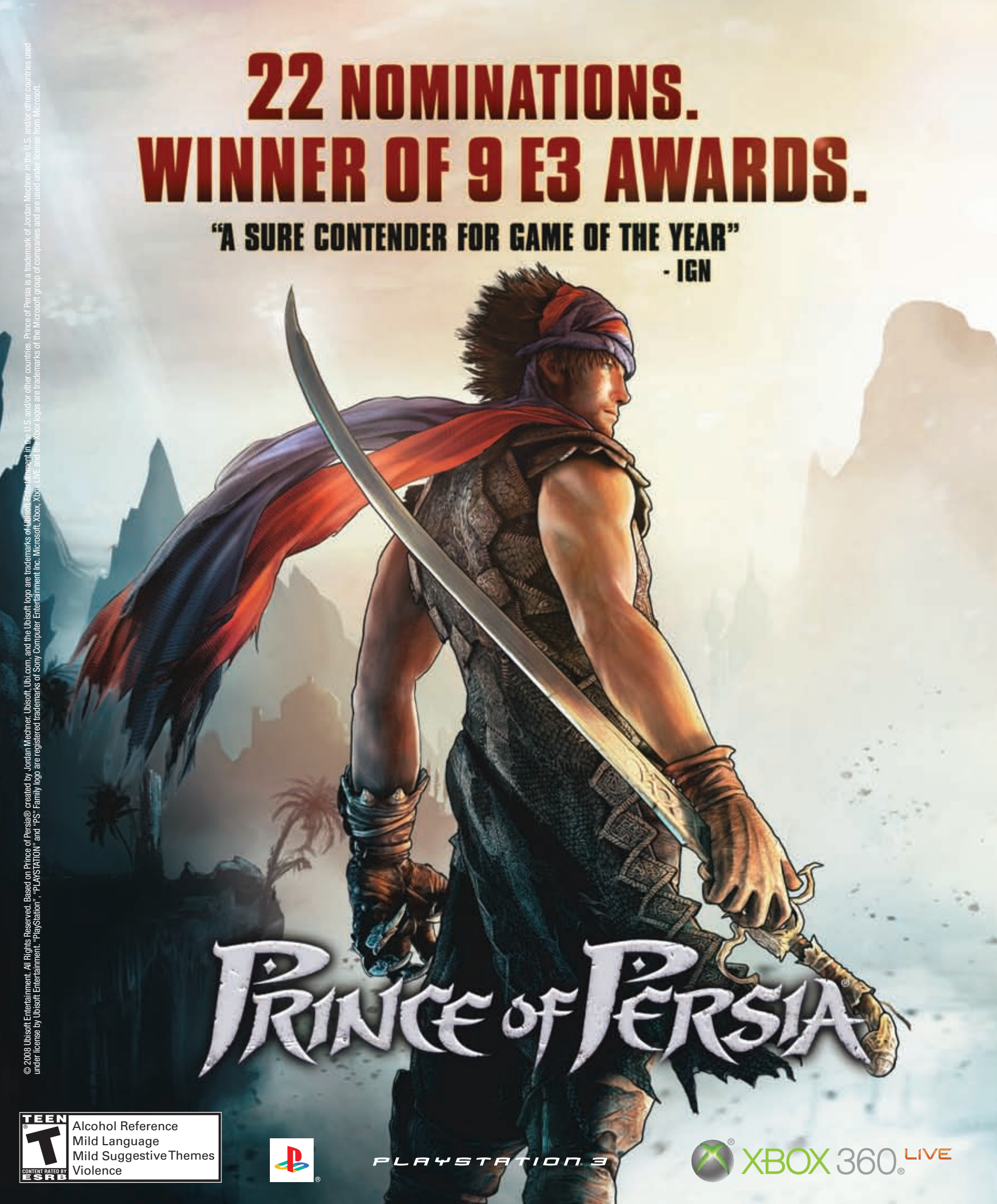
The commands you issue to your unions vary depending on battle circumstances, distance to target, and also the actions of the target. Movement on the battlefield is king; attacking a union that is headed in a different direction may net you some additional damage. And with so many different unions running around, it's sometimes difficult to predict where you enemy is going to go. Juggling the different unions, gauging which enemies to attack next—the combat system feels like a chunky mix of RTS and JRPG, like Final Fantasy Tactics at foot level.

What's more, the entire team is affected by the general flow of morale on the battlefield. A couple good, linked choices will depress the enemy, making their attacks less effective—and giving you a greater chance of dealing out greater damage. Additionally, quick time events are thrown in to keep players on their toes during long battles.

Oh, and by the way: All of this is accompanied by thick splashes of blood and a heavy metal soundtrack that adjusts dynamically to the combat. The Last Remnant feels like the goth offspring of Final Fantasy. Gone are the beach volleyballs and big yellow birds. In their place are screaming men, gutting each other with swords.

"The Last Remnant feels like the goth offspring of Final Fantasy."

It's the atmosphere of the game, above all, that makes it compelling. I can't speak enough about how classy the dub is, or how much this can improve a game. Sure, the hero still yells, "Let's kick some A!!" before every battle, and seems a little embarrassingly overzealous…but the competency of the overall acting and the quality of the dialogue could propel this game above more than one shortcoming. It's really easy to forgive a game for genre trappings if the story it's telling is good, and being told well. And it's very inspiring to see Square Enix taking this to heart. A full review of the game will determine just how good the package is, but so far, it looks very promising.



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System: PC, Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Replay Studios | **Publisher:** Gamecock | **Available:** 2009

Velvet Assassin

Killing you softly

A slow and painful death...

words Brady Fiechter

Velvet Assassin has just been described to me as more *Schindler's List* than *Saving Private Ryan*. The game is establishing World War II as its foundation, but giant booming set pieces packed with screaming soldiers and explosive machinery is not the call to arms. In the opening scene, titled the Lost Campaign, you are ordered to find a German bunker and blow it up, but perhaps the most unnerving part of this mission is the eerie calm of the falling leaves that rain down from the sun-soaked sky. There are Germans to kill, and kill you most certainly will, but they wait in the quiet of a setting that is pastoral and surreal.

It is most tellingly described as dreamlike, because all of this is created in the mind of an assassin on her deathbed in a hospital. As British operative Violette Summer dreams, she recalls moments of her past, which become missions in the game—from delivering cyanide poison to a prisoner hoping to commit suicide and preserve secrets, to a less ominous effort to prevent an art heist in Paris.

Weapons are basic and scarce. The stealth nature of the game invites heavy use of a knife, which can be wielded in as many as 50 different attack sequences. The few I pulled off, sneaking out of the shadows and positioning myself silently behind a relaxed German target, were wince-inducing, as a quick automatic sequence took over and the knife pierced the lower back. If a soldier has an exposed grenade, you can exchange the knife kill for a pull of the pin, then walk away and watch what happens when a grenade goes off on a man's belt.

Safety is in the shadows, but when exposure seems likely and you need a little help to survive, morphine shots can be administered to slow the scene down while Violette moves in for the strike. The morphine has been injected while Violet is in the real world, which flashes there and back into the dream world, where she is now dressed in her nightgown. Three shots can be taken in a level, and you will certainly want to use them, if only to enjoy the added sensation of a brutal attack.

After playing the opening area dominated by low-lit indoor corridors, I was shown where the game begins to construct the more disturbing ideas, in a ghetto in Warsaw, Poland. After exiting the sewers, you are introduced to another sparse area, where the horror is in the looming tragedy. A glimpse of soldiers can be seen running through the halls of rotting buildings, looking for any last survivors in what was known as the "cleaning process." Before entering a Gestapo prison, you come across a track of executed civilians. At this point, I was wondering if I'd find more pleasure in avoiding kills of my own—a permissible option—or be more juiced to use all those 50 kill choices.

"At this point, I was wondering if I'd find more pleasure in avoiding kills of my own..."

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Sonic Unleashed

The beast is Unleashed

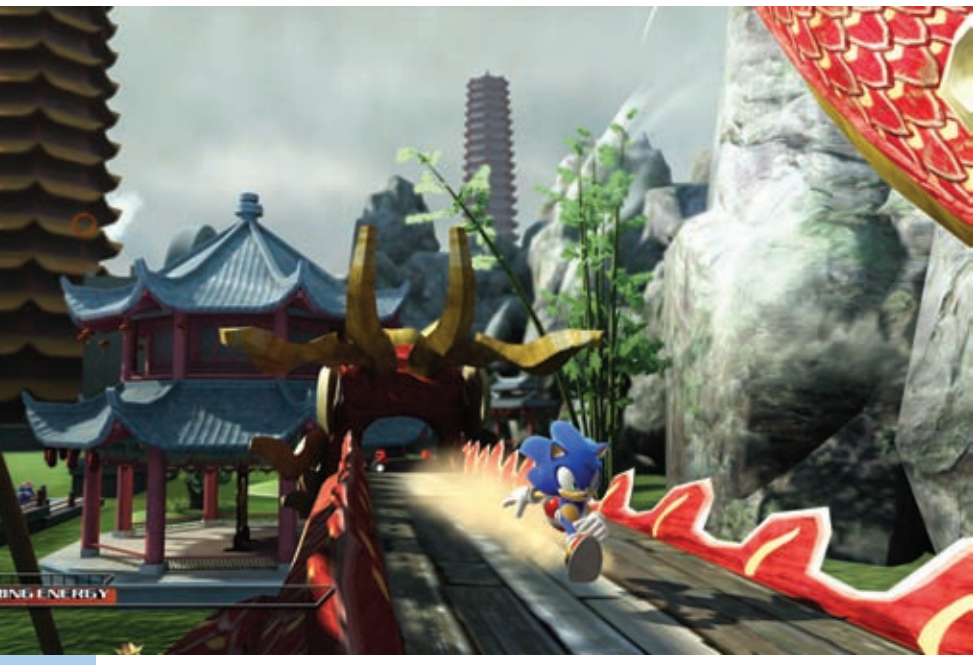
words Dave Halverson

Emerging from the quasi-comatose state of last month's sleep-crushing bottleneck only to discover that two of my most anticipated games of the year wouldn't be making the November issue deadline as planned sucked on an epic scale. I had entertained the possibility that Fable 2 review code might not arrive in time for a pre-release print review (we'll do the initial honors online), but the Sonic Unleashed preview was a lock. The Sega PR machine runs like clockwork and since November represented our only shot at a proper preview the arrival of my most anticipated sequel since Sonic Adventure was assured…right up until it wasn't. Faced with the choice of going straight to the review (not gonna do it) or a 6-hour drive to Sega to play it in-house, I headed north. In hindsight, considering the CHP officer who materialized out of nowhere on the deserted stretch of highway I happened to be doing mach-5 on while riveted to the new Metallica, and the utter chaos of navigating the labyrinthine avenues around Sega's new HQ in the wake of a climate change that's slow roasting us like human game hens, it was a long way to go to share my enthusiasm for the latest Sonic, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat…only on a cold day with a radar detector.

Although I'd seen neither hide nor hair of Unleashed since the tiny snippet I was given for our reveal back in May, I expected nothing less than a seamless barrage of high-speed side scrolling and 3D, the only variables being the whole Werehog angle, which could easily sully the overall presentation despite the team's best intentions, and how ground-breaking the new Hedgehog Engine really is. That answer came in about 10 seconds; or roughly the time it took me to gather my wits and begin breathing normally again…"Hedgehog Engine" indeed. This is the catalyst Sonic has never had, but always needed, tailor made for smooth, hitch free (believe it) speed and beauty. Toss everything you knew and loved or loathed about 3D Sonics past out the window. Every aspect of the traditional apparatus has been scrapped and replaced anew right down to the notoriously wooden low-tech ill-designed humans that have been hanging around since Sonic Adventure, which have been replaced by cool new exaggerated bystanders that look more like cartoons than popsicle sticks. Unleashed is lightning fast, silky smooth and positively radiant. The up-close state of the visuals is much more refined and detailed, and the bump mapping far more pronounced, and there's more of it.

What I didn't expect but was ultimately floored by was the return of practical control. Sonic has been on auto-pilot for so long I forgot how much fun he was to control at high speeds. Unleashed marks the end of point-and-go autonomous rail running. Sonic can actually navigate subtle twists and turns without going haywire, and runs with altogether newfound fluidity. As for the Werehog—a great idea given the majority of Sonic fans are adults—although Japan is notorious for coming up with great ideas and then failing to fully flesh them out, I had a good feeling based on my interview with Unleashed director/design lead Yoshihisa Hashimoto, who strikes me as somewhat of a perfectionist. Indeed there's much more to Sonic's alter ego—the result of a catastrophic run-in with Dr. Eggman within the series' most sinister set-up—than meets the eye. He's not fast, but he's not lumbering either; WereSonic is a fully fleshed-out move-intensive combo machine of a creature with an ape-like gait, pliant arms and a ferocious demeanor. There's nothing cute about it, or the aliens he's up against for that matter, which I suspect we've only begun to uncover. Prepare to fall in love with Sonic all over again, unless you're a hater, in which case do us all a favor and play through Brothers in Arms again.

"Unleashed is lightning fast, silky smooth and positively radiant."



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System: Wii | **Developer:** KCEK (Konami Kobe) | **Publisher:** Konami | **Available:** November 18

Castlevania Judgment

I'll be the judge of that

words Dave Halverson

There are 2 basic types of fighting games in the world from which all others derive: ultra-tactical, ultra-precise, painstakingly balanced duels awash with near bottomless technique, like the Street Fighter and Virtua Fighting series; and grandiose, quasi-tactical and not necessarily well-balanced duels awash with fan-service and brand derivative do-dads. Serious fighters usually start out in arcades and come in many shades of grey from Guilty Gear to Samurai Shodown—the common thread being tactics—while derivative fighters are all about satisfying the fan base. And lately the new craze that's sweeping the nation, waggling! Bleach, Naruto, Dragon Ball Z, Godzilla Unleashed—they all do it, with varying degrees of accuracy, and all—except for maybe Godzilla—have sold very, very well. Why would Konami and Koji Igarashi want to enter the much-beloved and highly revered Castlevania franchise into such a frivolous fraternity? Iga would have us believe that it's because we'd get too tired swinging the Wii Remote in a traditional Wii Castlevania game...Right. Looking at Wario Shake-It, imagining what he could do on Wii...I think we'd survive. Even if Judgment does turn out great—Iga, you owe us.

The first thing that struck me about Judgment was the roster. My guess is that Iga hurled darts at a huge flow chart in the Konami conference room... Thwack! "Circle of the Moon Boss #7 Camilla!" Not that I'm complaining. She looked great riding that huge skull on DS, but who knew? I've never seen breasts that big both protrude and jiggle! All the familiar faces are here: Simon, Alucard, Maria, Death, Eric, along with the random characters such as Camilla, and SOTN's Grant and Sypha, although they look nothing like they did as sprites. Grant, especially, who's got the best model in the game, and is now the pinnacle of pitch-black insanity. All the character models (for being on Wii; gotta say it) look great. I don't agree with some of the wardrobe choices (Simon has apparently joined a strange bullfighting society) and they don't look like themselves (I don't care what it says, that isn't Alucard!), but they're made well. Maria looks the best, although I really hope I never hear her say she's going to beat the "stuffin" out of anything ever again. Just so Shanoa is done properly and looks anything like she does in Ecclesia, I'll be happy.

> "My guess is that Iga hurled darts at a huge flow chart in the Konami conference room... "

The control scheme in Judgment is surprisingly well oriented for a waggler. Free running, blocking and jumping are done via Nunchuk and on the Wii Remote A launches your accessory (holy water, dagger, cross etc., selected from a list), and B is used in conjunction with various waggling to perform special attacks, as opposed to just waggling. The big show, however, comes when you fill the blue gauge after a which the mere act of pressing down unleashes a 20-or-so-second-long super-duper-cinematastic Castlevania smack down move that sucks the better part of your opponent's gauge dry. The environments look good, not great, but good (I'll go very good on the Ghost Ship) and contain both hazards and breakable objects to find hearts and other useful items. There's definitely an action feel happening here. Our preview build had balancing issues—I think I could take Ryu with Maria—but I have to admit, as wagglers go Judgment seems a lock to take the crown. Too bad it's one of those shiny paper ones you get at Burger King, but hey, a prize is a prize. Hey, I've got an idea. Remember that 2-D console game with Symphony in the title that hit just as 3-D had taken hold? The one that blew away sales projections and was heralded as one of the greatest games of all time? Maybe they should try that again.

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System: PC, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, PS2 | **Developer:** Crystal Dynamics (360, PS3, PC), Buzz Monkey (Wii, PS2) | **Publisher:** Eidos | **Available:** November 11

TOMB RAIDER UNDERWORLD

A Wii peek at Lara's Underworld

words Dave Halverson

Pulling into Eidos to have a go at the Wii version of Tomb Raider: Underworld and pick up a shiny Blu PS3 disc I wasn't sure what to expect. I interviewed the team and got to see enough gameplay to know that I was in love (again) nine months ago when the game was still very much in-progress, but I hadn't seen it since.

Playing Underworld for the first time on Wii, trying to funnel all of my Tomb Raider presets into the Wiimote and Nunchuk, was interesting to say the least. As good as it looks by Wii standards, and it's looking like a lock for best-looking game on the console, to me it's still like watching anime on cable where no matter how good it is you just know the real thing is going to be better. Easy for me to say—I'd have a 360/PS3 combo in the bathroom if I could hang a flat screen. Buzz Monkey's only concern is Wii-people, and they're going for broke to give them their money's worth. They've done a great job of scaling the game back to Wii spec by rebuilding it, tailoring the scope of each stage to fit the Wii rather than stripping away and dumbing down until it fits (a.k.a. porting). They've also created some cool Wii-centric mini-games (I'm not a fan of the mini-game and I liked them) and of course, practical levers. I saw that one coming from the parking lot but it didn't make me look any less dorky doing it. Baked-in ersatz normal mapping is also being deployed to simulate the game's authentic terrain and ruins to great effect.

Retracing my steps on PS3 later that evening, the dichotomy between the platforms had never been so palpable; on the PS3 TRU doesn't imitate nature, it replicates it, or at least Crystal Dynamics replicate it through the PS3. There's no way this game could be ported—it would be a mess. With Mirror's Edge and Tomb Raider: Underworld we may be beginning to see the PS3 in its element. I'll be surprised if they can make TRU run as smooth on Xbox360. Nine months ago I told myself that I wouldn't play Underworld until I had the done game in-hand. If there was one game I was going to relish from beginning to end this year having never played it as "work," this was it. It wore off a few weeks later but seeing it on PS3 reminded why I went there. I briefly sampled Beneath the Sea (the Mediterranean), Chiapas Mexico, and the Shiva Temple just enough to know that the game was shaping up to be every bit as good as I had anticipated, and then hit the PS button.

Wii

"Nine months ago I told myself that I wouldn't play Underworld until I had the done game in-hand..."

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System: PlayStation 3 | **Developer:** Insomniac | **Publisher:** SCEA | **Available:** November 11

Resistance 2

Pièce de Résistance

words Evan Shamoon

While it may not have been exceptionally groundbreaking, Resistance: Fall of Man was probably the closest thing Sony had to a killer app at the U.S. launch of the PlayStation 3. Borrowing from the genre's best, the design of the apocalyptic first-person shooter maintained the high level of spit-and-polish that developer Insomniac is known for, and showed off some degree of what the hardware was capable of. Given Resistance's success, it's not surprising that the franchise is now returning for round two.

Sucks to be an evil, menacing alien in these days of guaranteed sequels, doesn't it?

The single-player campaign begins in Iceland, shortly after the end of the original. You once again take the reins of reliably angry hero Nathan Hale, who is not only resistant to the Chimera virus currently devastating the populace, but also gains power from it. Here you join—*wait for it*—an elite task force of other like-blooded soldiers, which is where the action picks up.

It's brutal out there in the End of the World, so expect big things: Some of the monsters you'll fight along the way are colossal, multiple-screens-high uglies, just begging for a taste of your weaponry—which includes upgraded versions of the carbine, Rossmore, and LAARK guns from the original. (All of the weapons in Resistance 2 come with a handy secondary fire, including some great detonation devices.) Everything looks every bit as big-budget as you'd expect, with some of the most convincingly realistic motion-captured characters (down to their minute hand movements when opening security doors) we've seen in a game of this type. Insomniac's close proximity to the heart of the CG world in Los Angeles seems to have paid its dividends.

> "Insomniac's close proximity to the heart of the CG world in Los Angeles seems to have paid its dividends."

The game's real hook, however, is its cooperative-mode multiplayer. You'll be able to play as one of three classes—medic, special ops, or soldier—and earn experience that will let you level up as you play. As in games like Team Fortress 2 and Call of Duty 4, the roles are varied: heavy soldiers can take a hit, while special ops can deal some serious damage and drop ammo for the team. Medics hold rifles with a primary fire that shoots out a beam that drains energy from enemies, and can also be used to fire charges that can restore the energy of squad mates with a well-aimed blast. The game seems willing to take advantage of its science fiction setting, which is a nice change of pace from the recent spate of "realistic" shooters out there.

Even more impressive is the fact that parts of the game support up to eight players in co-op mode, giving you plenty of room to flex your team's collective muscle. Each level of the game has its own story arc built around the single-player campaign, so it challenges squads of eight players with a series of missions set in different locales. The missions can be tackled in any order you choose, and will be unlocked as you progress.

Which begs the question: Killzone Who?

LOOK OUT BELOW!!

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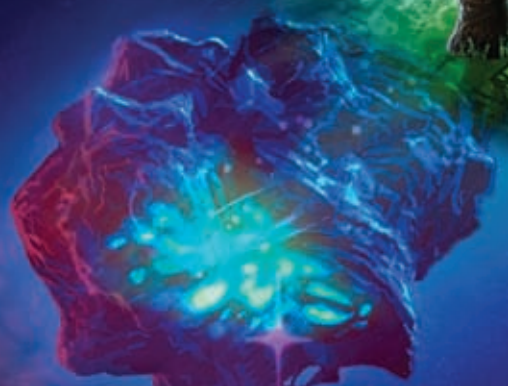

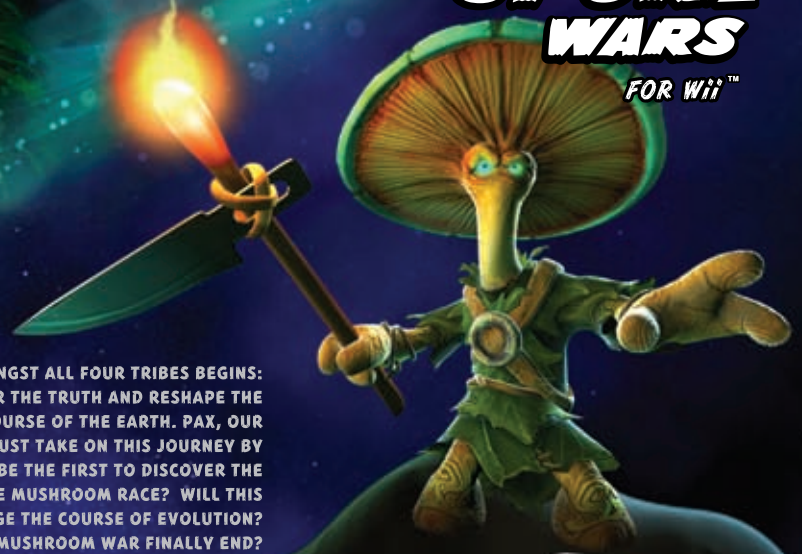

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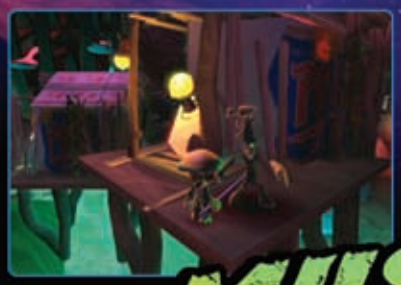

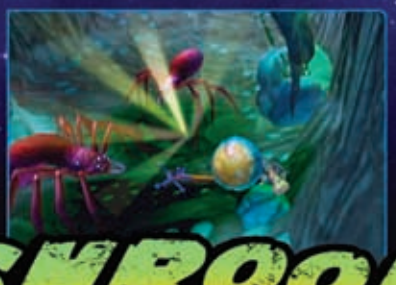

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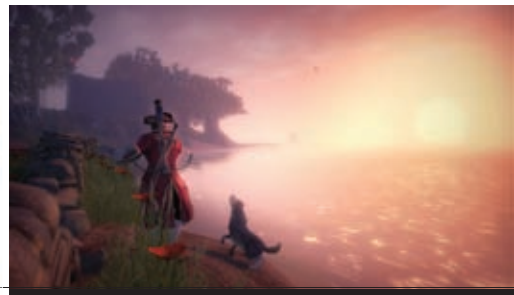
Fable II

Let's all tell us a story…

words Heather Campbell



Peter Molyneux, famous as an outspoken enthusiast for his games, is a man preoccupied with temptation. He has attempted to quantify curiosity, in an effort to develop a system that encourages absentmindedness.

In Fable II, the devil is literally in the details.

"I wanted to give you something you'd never seen or touched before," says Molyneux, teasing at this core idea. In order to affect people, Molyneux intends to activate temptation. The greatest stories are the ones that are "an affecting experience for [you]," and Fable II, as Molyneux has directed it, is supposed to be a constantly distracting journey through a rich and extremely realized world.

"When you get to the end of this game, I want you to feel like you've learned something about yourself," he adds. As most gamers are aware, Fable II is a story that is altered through choice—and the final moments of the game can be dramatically different for each player.

Through data collection centers in the test phase of Fable, Molyneux has already learned something about us. When confronted with a choice between good and evil, Molyneux found that "Americans play good."

When asked why he thinks this is, Molyneux pauses and says, "because you're conditioned to do it." His goal, then, is undoing our conditioning through temptation.

But what is the system of temptation in Fable II? A glittering, golden path shimmers in front of the player as a hint of the next immediate goal. Following that path exclusively would take 12 to 14 hours, and would end in the completion of the game. But the protagonist's sidekick, a dog, is constantly leading the player to more interesting places. "We really didn't want the dog to be annoying," says Molyneux, who, as a result, has been developing the dog's AI system for a terrifically long time. "He absolutely loves you. He is unique to you."

There's so much to say about Fable II that it's difficult to condense the preview to a simple page. One of the more exciting ideas is the co-op play, which allows players to see ghosts of other players who are online in the same area. Players can choose to engage with other online Live members, or ignore them altogether for a more personal experience. But part of the fun of all this temptation is to see where other players have gone with their game.

> "When confronted with a choice between good and evil, Molyneux found that 'Americans play good.'"

It's a bit naive to subscribe to what Molyneux has to say, given that he has a history of being overzealous about his games…but by the end of our preview, I was truly excited. Fleshing out the ideas of Fable I and developing a system of curiosity seems to be the right path for Fable II. The question is, how much were the developers tempted to stray from it?

System: Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal | **Publisher:** Ubisoft | **Available:** November

Naruto: The Broken Bond

Go forward, young warrior

I loved the look and feel of Ubisoft's Naruto: Rise of a Ninja, but with a scant eight hours of campaign padded by a seemingly endless string of Naruto vs. Bandit battles, it couldn't hold my interest for long. Fortunately, Ubisoft seems to have zeroed in on the original title's flaws while developing The Broken Bond, a direct sequel that promises twice the content of its predecessor and a great deal more gameplay depth.

Much of that depth will come from the new three-man parties with whom Naruto explores his world. Not only can you finally swap out Naruto for other characters in combat (which you can do at any point, tag-team style), but you can also switch playable characters on the field as well. Your two partners follow you at all times, ready to be called upon to use their trademark abilities. For example, when Naruto starts bumbling into invisible traps, you can take control of Neji and use his Byakugan sight to reveal them. Not all of the 25 playable characters in the multiplayer combat modes will get to participate in the campaign mode, but Naruto will have at least a handful of allies to partner with.

The campaign will offer plenty of opportunities to show off your team's unique skills, with vast areas that are packed with alternate routes and hidden secrets. The game still follows a strictly linear progression (corresponding to episodes 80 to 135 of the TV series), but offers a lot more choice in routes and tactics as you strive to accomplish your missions. It also offers—mercifully—a far wider selection of enemies to fight. (Well, it is still one bandit after another, but at least they look and act different.) The developers have also put a little more work into the heroes' movesets to better differentiate them in combat, and have added new two-on-two brawls to the online fighting mode.

With all the elements in place, hopefully the Broken Bond will achieve the potential success that Rise of a Ninja couldn't quite deliver on. **Casey Loe**

System: Wii | **Developer:** Cing, Inc. | **Publisher:** XSEED Games | **Available:** January 2009

Little King's Story

Cute Little Brainwasher

Little King's Story could be retitled "Pied Piper, Defiant Dictator." It's a game about controlling tiny squads of villagers to expand your kingdom, using their loyalty to increase the money in your coffers, and leading them to their deaths in the countryside. It's a game about a cute little sociopath. Or maybe it's a subtle introduction to the power of propaganda.

Not that you'd know it from the screenshots.

Like Sim City on the ground level, or Harvest Moon with battle scenes...or Square Enix's My Life as a King... Little King's Story's major interactive element is micromanagement. Every day, the little king checks in with his advisor to find out how the people in his village are doing. He reads his mail, trying to decipher the nonsense that his townspeople are reporting to him. Starting only with three friends (and a crown that lets him command them), the king eventually leads more than 50 types of villagers into errands and resource gathering: digging up treasure, building more buildings, chopping down trees and making a dynasty out of a dust bowl. Expansion happens when the king leads villagers into the frontier and commands them to fight bosses. And even though this king has a frightening ability to lead people to their deaths, the kingdom just keeps getting bigger.

What the game has going for it is personality—each villager seems slightly unique, which makes it easier to invest in them, and harder to watch them leave. Also, the longer they're around, the more powerful they become. A good leader will have an army of strangely-hatted civilians in no time, and they'll follow his every whim...as far as the likely E rating will take them. **Heather Campbell**

System: PS3, Xbox360 | **Developer:** GRIN | **Publisher:** Capcom | **Available:** January 2009

BIONIC COMMANDO

GRIN and Capcom go 2 for 2 and a legend is twice reborn

words Dave Halverson

To most, Bionic Commando is just another adrenaline-charged action game vying for their holiday dollar, but for legions of gamers who cut their teeth on the thunder of 2-mega cartridge power on the 8-bit NES, it's like getting that shot of adrenaline, *Pulp Fiction* style—straight to the heart. In the late '80s/early '90s, videogames were a more clear-cut proposition. Most were bad, some were good and precious few were great, and more often than not the back of the box was all you had to go by. In a time when having a game console at home still seemed miraculous, great games were so few and far between and so far superior to the status-quo, they had a profound effect on their generation, registering more like life-defining events than mere pastime, a bridge to euphoria that outsiders couldn't possibly understand…like *Fight Club*, only you could tell whoever would listen. My memories of Blaster Master, Ghosts 'n Goblins, The Legend of Zelda, Ninja Gaiden, Metal Gear, Mega Man and most of all Bionic Commando are more vivid than my high-school graduation (making it all the more ironic that they proved more valuable, too).

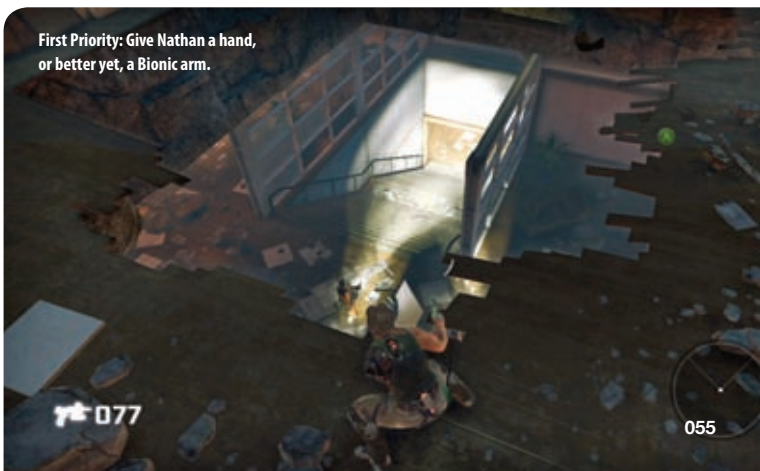
Even though Bionic Commando arrived three years into the four I spent tethered to the NES (nine months before the dawn of the 16-bit generation), I still consider it my first encounter with anything resembling physics or a "play mechanic." The graphics were insane for 8-bit, Nathan "Rad" Spencer was the coolest hero I'd ever seen and the Rambo-plus-Nazis story line couldn't have been timelier (even though the American version replaced Nazis with "Nazz," it was painfully obvious that Master-D was Adolf), but it was the grappling arm that made it an experience like no other. The art of gripping, swinging, releasing and regripping was pure exhilaration, made all the better by a theme song that's stuck in my head to this day.

In all the years since Capcom helped shape the industry as we know it, they're one of very few that have managed to grow and put down firm U.S. roots, creating new brands with mass appeal while staying true to the brands (and fans) that got them here. How have they done it? In a word: Japan. Aside from their second attempt at creating a laudable U.S. studio (the first went down in flames), which produced Maximo 1 and 2 before bidding us farewell, Capcom's success is attributed to its cutting-edge Japanese studios. After helping define the platformer and classic arcade action game, they invented the versus-fighting game as we know it, and survival horror. But somewhere around 2003 things began to change. America's thirst for first-person anything and realistic violence pushed the FPS genre to the forefront, and gaming's voice in the press began to march to a different drummer (present company not included). Shinji Mikami's P.N. 03 (not his best work but certainly a shooter for the ages, with franchise potential written all over it) tanking was the first sign of trouble, followed by Viewtiful Joe doing less than blockbuster sales in the wake of sky-high scores and piles of awards. But when Okami—one of the most innovative and altogether enthralling games of all time—barely reached the half-million mark worldwide, it was obvious that there'd been a shift. Not necessarily in gamers' tastes, but in what it takes to produce a million-seller. Games like Okami have become "niche," which by today's standards can be highly profitable, as long as the budget stays between $5 and $10 million. But the games that are hitting biggest have two things in common: military themes and guns. Talk about opportunity beating on your door. What better time to finally bring the Bionic Commando out of retirement? The only question…how? Japan isn't exactly known for their shooters, or robust engines for that matter, but Capcom has always been external-studio intolerant, let alone with one of their marquee brands.

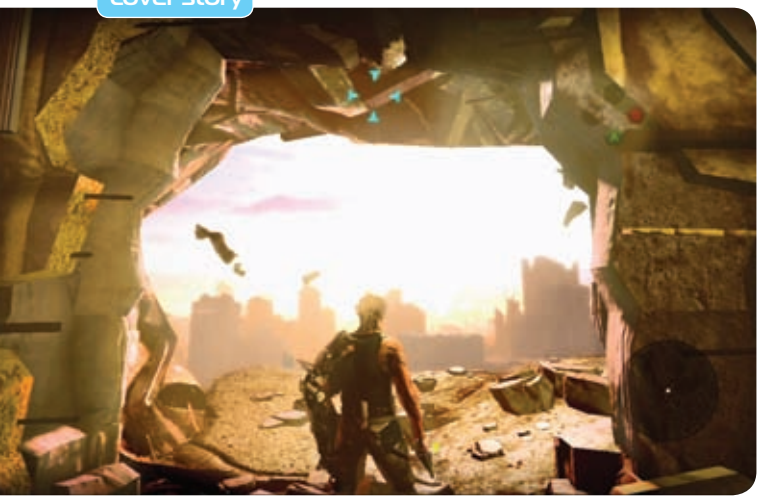
When the news came down about the Bionic Commando sequel, I was way more excited about Bionic Commando Rearmed than I was about the new Bionic Commando. The screens looked great and Capcom would surely keep a close eye on things, but between those dreadlocks and whoever GRIN was, I was doing my best not to get my hopes up. By the time Comic-Con rolled around though, I cared even less. Having just beaten Rearmed the night before, I was on cloud nine, already thinking about the chances of Capcom following suit with Strider. It was only by dumb luck that I stumbled upon the playable Bionic Commando demo while I was waiting for Heather's next round in the Street Fighter IV Tournament. What struck me initially as I watched showgoers trying to come to grips with the control (eight-button control pads and Star Wars nerds are not compatible) was the amount of fine detail within such a massive (stunning) area, and how awesome Nathan looked. Still frames don't do him justice. I'm diametrically opposed to realistic male heroes (and realistic military anything, but this is sci-fi, so no worries), but somehow Nathan comes across as more videogame real than real-life real. Once Lord Vader finally tired of slamming into the same wall for five minutes and I finally got the chance to play it, I became very, very excited. Although I was limited to a single section of a devastated cityscape, it was painfully evident that every facet of the game was in peak form, but most of all…no prods. Not a single blinking button prompt, message or indicator outside of a subtle blue attach icon and a blip indicating where I had to go. Next stop: Capcom!

I was given access to two main areas of Bionic Commando over the six or so hours I got to play, beginning with the intro segment, where we find Nathan as a one-armed dead-man-walking about to be barbecued for some act of high treason that you just know he didn't commit. His eloquent last words are cut short, however, somewhere between "eat shit" and "die," when a group of terrorists decide to unleash hell on a particular chunk of earth, creating one big partially toxic sniper-, grunt- and mech-infested hot zone. The first order of business is to get Nathan's arm back. The game's prologue plays out indoors, where you get your first dose of GRIN's amazing eye for detail as Nathan passes through a decimated office building. Limited to gunfire, the ranged combat is tight from the get-go, but you'll be too busy ogling the accuracy of the destruction to care, as the sunlight cuts through air thick with dust and papers that used

"I'm amazed anytime a game can conjure the feeling I used to get when games were shiny and new... But hey, people to kill, things to grapple."



First Priority: Give Nathan a hand, or better yet, a Bionic arm.



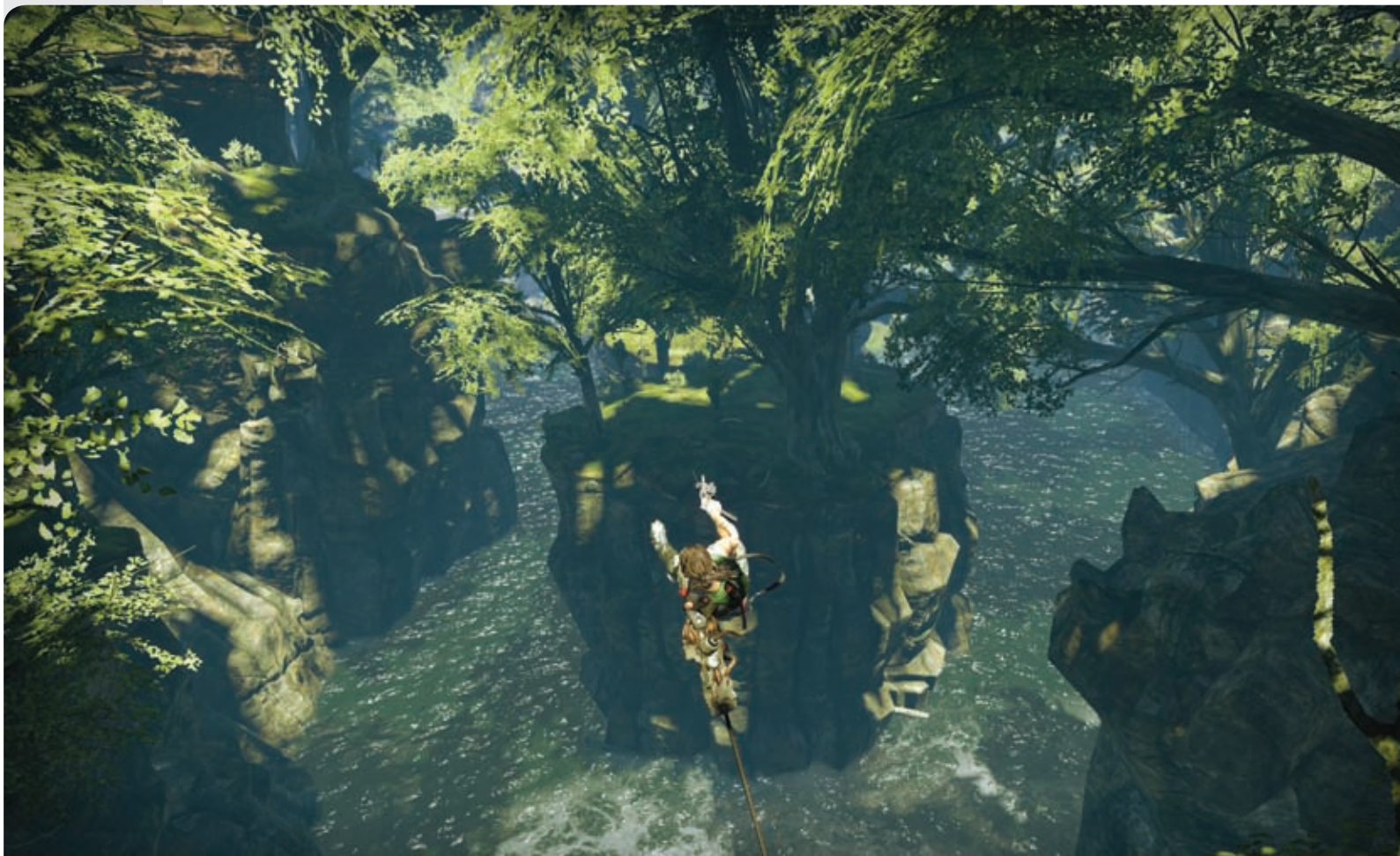
The adventure begins...

to mean something fluttering in the air. Even here, in the game's straightforward first act, GRIN rewards the player who thinks on his or her feet. Emerging from the building, arm back in socket, looking out over the decimated city contrasted by the bright morning sun as the Bionic Commando theme slowly rises in the background…what a moment. Anyone who loved the NES game will surely get the chills, if not shed a tear of the coming joy. I'm amazed anytime a game can conjure the feeling I used to get when games were shiny and new… But hey, people to kill, things to grapple. You're not alone in the "Broken City" and you've got a bionic arm to master. Bionic Commando's controls are of the easy-to-learn, rewarding as all hell to master variety. Holding down the left trigger, the reticule appears gray until it hits on a spot within range and magically fires and attaches. No need to release—just hold it down (it's simple for a reason, trust me). Once the arm is attached, Nathan can jump (yes, jump! and swing), zip or flip up and perch onto whatever he's attached to. Nuances abound…There's more than one way to kill a terrorist and ammo is limited. Nathan can grab an opponent and send them flying (far) with no return flight; use the Heavy Punch Combo to flip a grunt into the air, then jump and punch it with max velocity, or if he's in a particularly foul mood Zip-Kick, by connecting the Bionic Arm directly to the mofo and propelling himself like a human torpedo with the arm's motor. The Kite move is another crowd-pleaser, where you connect to your opponent, double tap Y to send it flying, then target mid-air and juggle with gunfire. The more moves you earn, the better the game gets and the stronger the moves become.

How you approach the game is entirely up to you. You can focus on traditional duck and cover (in which case, Nathan's animation will surely spoil you forever, as his AI ducks in perfect harmony with the environment so you can concentrate on the target), maneuver yourself behind enemies by mastering catch and release, or use a combination of all three. The key to unlocking all the game has to offer, however—as well as surviving the opposition—comes by mastering advanced tactics, which in turn evolve to the next level. Merely completing each section of the game (rushing) isn't going to get it done, at least not without a lot of frustration. Each section of Bionic Commando comes with a list of challenges conducive to where you're at in the game—nothing too ominous, just fun, really, to unlock new moves and weapons and then improve upon them as you press on. As your arsenal and moves build, so goes the gameplay. After a few hours you'll be pulling off moves you can't believe. For expert players the possibilities are endless, and for the up-and-comer GRIN have provided the ultimate training ground to develop and hone their skills, with an off-the-charts level of replayability. Within the first two acts the shielded Biomechs proved the toughest challenge, and their elimination is non-negotiable. The only way to kill one is by hitting the exposed area on their back—nothing new, right—only you've never fought anything this smart. They can sense you when you're near, and while you might get in a shot from afar, it also tells them where you are, and they will chase you. I can't remember ever having so much fun or getting such a sense of accomplishment by killing anything. At one point I'd climb to the highest point, wait for them to rocket up and then hitch a ride—they hate that—and then Zip-Kick until I could position myself for a death-from-above maneuver. Just make sure you're not over water…the Bionic Commando sinks like a rock. By the end of act 2, I'd amassed the Tungsten (pistol), Frag Grenades, Super Joe's Machine Gun, the "Hiker" Shotgun, Yelena (a sniper rifle), the Tarantula homing rocket launcher and the Bulldog Grenade Launcher, which I used to kill the Mole Boss, when I wasn't running for my life, dodging of his fire pattern and forward thrust (flicking cars into the air like popcorn) until I grappled the bastard and gave him the old Death From Above.

Bionic Commando is a spectacular action game full of spectacular moves, spectacular AI, and spectacular graphics set within spectacular environments made possible by a spectacular engine that delivers spectacular physics, brought to you by Capcom Japan and USA via Sweden's finest, who ought to be wearing ear-to-ear GRINs. That's a lot to grapple with…

100% pure, game and player. This is what it's all about.



a BIONIC interview with:

Ulf Andersson Creative Director, GRIN
Ben Judd Producer, Capcom

play: So the story goes that the night before your big pitch with Capcom, every lead at GRIN played the original Bionic Commando, a move that demonstrated a level of devotion and love for the original game that ultimately won them over…That's *really* cool, but I have to ask, which version did you guys play? Because the NES game is way better and longer than the arcade game.

Ben Judd: That's a good question and, of course, the answer is the NES version of Bionic Commando. True fans know that is the defining version of the game that introduced not only a great story, a diabolical villain and, of course, the first Bionic Commando that had multiple swings. (The arcade version did not.) Although, come to think of it, GRIN is a European developer, so it's strange that more of them don't define the series with the Commodore 64 version of the game, which was both more popular in Europe and based on the arcade. On the Bionic Commando community site, it is quite interesting to see the number of European gamers that visit and really wanted the 3-D Bionic Commando to be based on the Commodore 64 canon and not on the NES version.

Ulf Andersson: We mostly played the NES version here in Sweden. I don't know why, I was big on C64/Amiga, but played a lot of NES at my friend's house. The NES version is still the best.

Welcome to a level of Bionic Commando.

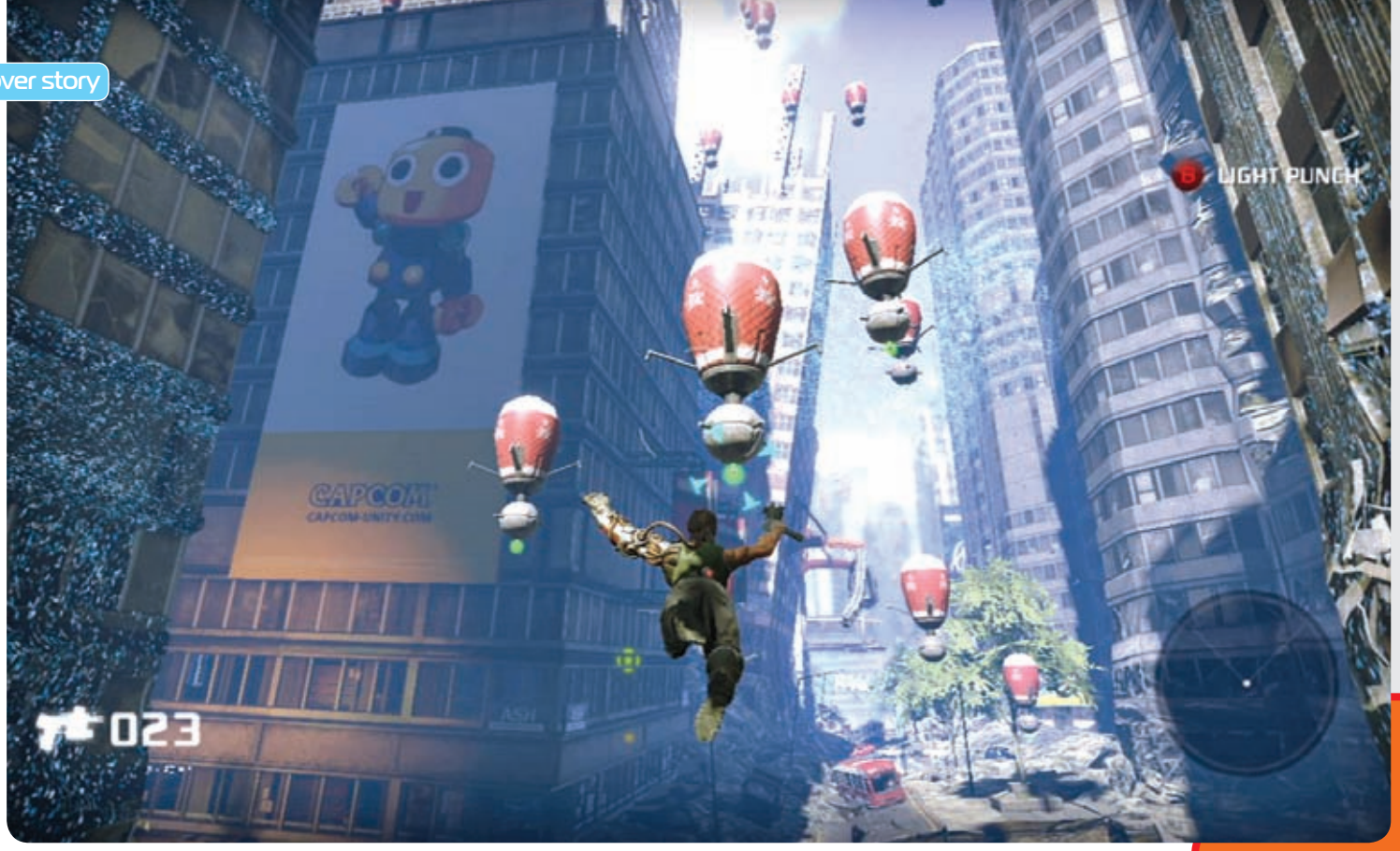
> "We've had creative advisors from Capcom on the project from the start. We've been able to draw from a very strong creative source, that's for sure." - Ulf Andersson

I waited 20 years to hear Capcom use the words "Bionic Commando" and "sequel" in the same sentence, but when the time came all I could think about was how they'd do it. Taking the 2-D gameplay into 3-D would have been cool on PS2, GameCube or Xbox but wouldn't fly on 360 and PS3. Before Capcom revealed any details we were debating which would be cooler: the ultimate homage (a modern 2-D version) or a full-blown open-world-style 360/PS3 epic (not exactly Capcom Japan's strong suit). Next thing I know, Capcom are doing both (!) with Stockholm based GRIN (?). I don't play modern-warfare games—although Ghost Recon seems mighty tempting now—so I had no idea who you guys were, and even if I did, the phrase "Bionic Commando from the team that brought you Ghost Recon!" might have killed me. No offense, but I've seen my share of Japanese classics bite it hard by way of non-Japanese studios. Anyway, how did this come about? I need details. How did you get Capcom Japan to green-light not only a big open-world BC sequel but a 2-D reprisal? And whatever you did, can you please bottle it so I can send it to Koji Igarashi, please?

BJ: To be honest, this was me personally pushing the project internally for several years. Several things fell into place at the right time. After me having some success at creating an internal localization team at Capcom Japan and having translated and interpreted for Inafune-san at several events, we worked up a good friendship. I mentioned to Inafune-san that Bionic Commando was a franchise that was ripe for renewal, but at first he had his reservations, since the original Bionic Commando did not do as well in Japan. However, being a good friend he considered the idea and put one of our Japanese directors up to the task of playing the original. The director said it was incredibly hard, but also had a great and unique gameplay element in the wire that could definitely be turned into something special. Additionally, I was translating for Inafune-san at E3 one year and he was asking some of the press what old games they wanted to be remade. As fate would have it, the two most commonly mentioned titles were Bionic Commando and Street Fighter. I think that was the point in which Inafune-san realized that a new Bionic Commando would indeed make sense. I never intended to be a producer, I just really believed in the idea of creating a new Bionic Commando, but Inafune-san pulled me aside and said that since I had pushed and believed in the project that I should be the one to lead it. All at once the wind was knocked out of me. Not in a million years did I think I would be one of the first foreign producers for a Japanese company, but the next thing I knew…there I was, helming a PSP Bionic Commando title.

We initially set up a small internal team to build out a PSP version of the game based on the Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins PSP game engine, but about three months into the planning stages, Inafune-san approached me and said, "I think this title needs to be a next-gen title…and we need to do it on three platforms." Again, I thought I was going to pass out. To not only allow me a chance to create a Bionic Commando game but to also give me the chance to do it in style. It was either the bravest move ever… or the dumbest. But no matter how the cards fall, the project got rolling.

The one thing Inafune-san was particular about was using a foreign team. I have to admit, I had some serious doubts about it at first, given Capcom's history with some very bad Western-developed sequels. However, in hindsight, Inafune-san knew what he was doing. By making me the producer, I could help bridge the gap between some of our internal design teams and with GRIN's designers. It would be the best of both worlds and help us avoid some of the pit traps we've had in the past. Additionally, instead of locking it down to Japanese developers, we got the advantage of working with a team that knows shooters. Let's face it, when it comes to open worlds and shooting mechanics, the West really has it nailed. So actually,



Does whatever a Spider can't: To grab and release (grapple) one must first connect.

working with a foreign developer worked out quite well for us. We had the great boss design and puzzle elements that Japanese developers have down pat and a great shooting mechanic and open world that Western developers have mastered.

Prior to Comic-Con, Rearmed was already on my Top 10, but I had no idea what the 3-D Bionic Commando would play like. I just hoped that the overall dual-release method would be a success opening the door to a potential Strider project. I knew that the environments looked great and that it featured a very non-Japanese-looking Nathan Spencer, but that was pretty much it. Beyond that I presumed—only because it's become the norm for large-scale adventure games—that the gameplay would be scripted; peppered end-to-end with how-to's and prompts galore. After sampling a few areas, I can't tell you how happy I was to finally be wrong. How have you managed to keep Bionic Commando so pure? Did you have to convince Capcom or do they just "get it" in a time when so few companies do?

BJ: One of the best parts about a Japanese company that is employing a foreign producer is that I pretty much got to lead the project and have the final word on things. Of course, there were times when the internal staff were worried about the direction of the game, but I could always step in and say, "This is what a 3-D Bionic Commando needs to be". Since I was the one who pushed for the idea and one of the biggest fans, I had free run of the project. Bionic Commando was always meant to be a title that focused on the U.S. market, so having an American as the producer just made sense. That doesn't mean that everything went perfectly. It did take a while for us to find the central gameplay. Would it be 100% free-roaming? Mission-based? Co-op? Would Nazis appear? How would the character look? So many things went back and forth, but by far the most difficult element to nail was the swing. We went from a 100% realistic swing mechanic, in which you lost momentum after about two swings, having fixed swing points, and even thinking about fixed animations, but in the end we created what I consider to be the perfect blend of freedom and auto-aim. Unlike the Spider-Man games, you can attach to just about any surface. That makes the swing element more skill-based, but once you learn it, you can truly

go anywhere you want to. That was the goal, and the final product will NOT disappoint.

UA: As with all new/brave design, it's a struggle to get it across. We basically had to first prove the swing mechanic, so we started that development before we actually got signed for the project, and then moved on to the game world, shooting mechanics and all the bionic powers. I'm very happy about the result. It's very close to what I envisioned in the beginning of development.

The game's original designer, Tokuro Fujiwara, left Capcom around '95-'96 to form Whoopee Camp (I miss Tomba), but then returned for Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins. Is he still at Capcom? Are any of the original team members?

BJ: He was mainly an outsource developer for us on UGNG, so he was only with us for one project. Being a huge fan of the original, I did look all throughout the company to see if I could find any of the original staff, but all of them had either quit Capcom or left the industry altogether. Twenty years is a long time to be working at the same company. But I did talk to some of the staff that worked on Mega Man 2, which was developed in tandem at the time. They did give me a few stories about what the development of Bionic Commando was like back in the day. The one I like most was when the initial design document was submitted, no one thought it would be possible to program a swing mechanic like that on the NES. However, in a couple of months they had it up and running and everyone was amazed by how well it worked. To think that Bionic Commando Rearmed has that same swing mechanic intact and continues to be a fantastic game just shows how well the original was designed.

UA: We've had creative advisors from Capcom on the project from the start. We've been able to draw from a very strong creative source, that's for sure. It's been a pleasure to work with Capcom from a creative standpoint.

Twenty years isn't really all that long a stretch by gaming standards. While the 30- to 40-year-old gamers who cut their teeth on NES are certainly among the most excited about this dual resurgence, legions of 20-something gamers have likely either experienced the old NES game or at least heard of the game's exploits, and Rearmed has just introduced Bionic Commando's sticky brand of gameplay to a whole new generation. That's one big melting pot of potential new Commandos; from wily vets who've seen everything from flicker to HD to the 13-year-old kid who played Rearmed and thinks this new side-scrolling thing might give 3-D a run for its money. While they're all adept gamers, yesterday's "modern-warfare" games were rooted more in the melodramatic with exaggerated themes, but lately all things warfare have taken a turn toward realism and palpable violence. How did you arrive at your final design? Did you know from the start that you wanted to go with a more practical world design or was it a process? Is the overall tone more throwback good vs. evil or staunch military drama?

BJ: I always believed the best part about Bionic Commando was the fine line it walks between fantasy and reality. We already have bionics from a technical standpoint. And with how the government loves its high-tech toys, the idea of a Bionic Commando is not so far-fetched. People play games because they want to enjoy that nice bit of fantasy and escape from the real world. They want to be superheroes, snipers, gods and even zombie-killing reporters. Bionic Commando is great because there is a certain amount of reality in the fantasy-based world we created that allowed us to introduce actual places that people know, and that in turn brings the story even closer to the real world.

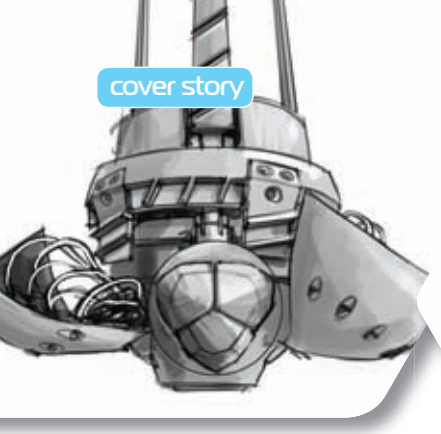
"I always believed the best part about Bionic Commando was the fine line it walks between fantasy and reality." -Ben Judd

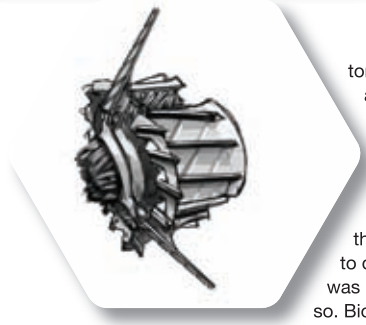
UA: One of the strongpoints of the games medium is that it can kick-start your imagination, so that's always a good production goal. Also to make the swing mechanic work, I knew that we needed a very interesting environment.

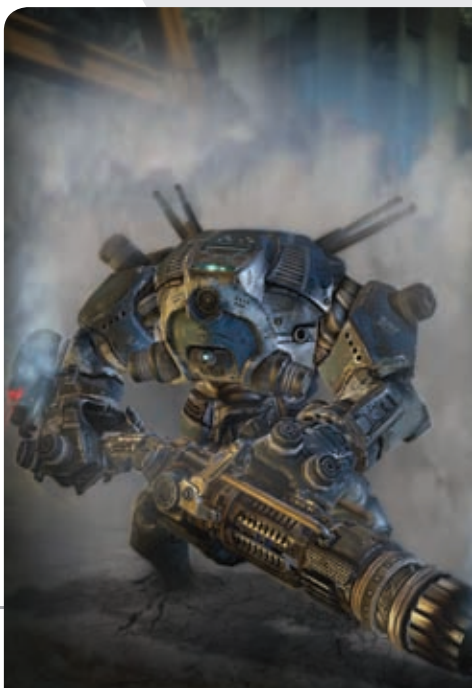
Here's a fun bit of information, if you look at the name of the game: Bionic Commando. It's part fantasy/sci-fi and part realism. I thought that it would be a good base for the design elements we needed. Half gameplay-oriented sci-fi (Bionic) and half mood/setting-based realism (Commando); it made for a good theme when designing the game. This base was something we used throughout the entire production. In a lot of cases the simplest methods are the best.

Nathan's reward for serving his country turns out to be a big middle finger, but when things go boom they turn to him, just as they're about to punch his ticket. And I thought Rambo got a raw deal. Working within that framework, how would you describe the universe and feel of the game overall? Sci-fi? War drama? Are there shades of gray? Size it up for us…

BJ: It's definitely shades of gray. We live in a very difficult time right now as Americans. Half of the people support the war, the other have distrust in the government. It is that turmoil that Spencer symbolizes in the game. He is a true patriot who loves his country and people. Yet the men in charge ultimately make him take a fall for their bad choices. Spencer is







torn between defending the country he loves and distrusting the government that runs it. I mean, most of us love America and what it symbolizes. But I'm sure there are a lot of us that do not trust the government as well. So it's very easy to understand where Spencer is coming from. Then we can always throw in the issue of whether it is ethically right to develop some of this new technology. Cloning was a big issue about five years ago and remains so. Bionic and just how much we should augment our soldiers will continue to be something that stays on the radar as well. When the government saw that bionic technology was dangerous and could create some bad PR situations, they shut it down and demanded that all bionically augmented soldiers return their bionic parts. The only problem is that for some soldiers, that would mean giving up the power to walk (bionic legs), see (bionic eyes) and in even some cases live (bionic organs). Soldiers were forced to either obey or run. It's this mishandling of the whole situation that serves as the powder keg for our story's main catalyst.

Honestly, I wasn't sure about Nathan when the first screens were released. I was so overjoyed that he wasn't another stock jarhead I got choked up, but plausible characters are still tricky, especially in a game like this. As soon as I started playing, however, I felt the kind of connection you get from a Ryu Hayabusa, or Altair: grounded in reality yet more videogame real than creepy real-life real. Can you take us through the transition process from concept to animation?

BJ: The character design decision has been a hotly debated issue. The one thing we knew we didn't want to do was create another generic space marine. We also knew that we wanted to give the player something that would animate well and show off swing direction when the character was swinging. We came up with many ideas like scarves (Strider) and headbands (Metal Gear), but ultimately we decided to go with the hair. Based on the story, dreads seem to serve the perfect balance. From a design choice they showed off the swing direction well, gave the character an almost anti-institution aspect, and really showed the main character's fall from grace. People change in prison, especially when their entire belief system has been rocked, and Spencer is no different.

Early on in the project, we sat down and analyzed the colors of the original NES sprite. These were then used as a base for the new design, but the original did not have a good legs-torso separation, so we decided to change that part around a bit. Once the colors and the body style were locked down, we began working on the arm. I wanted an arm that looked cool but at the same time looked like it could actually work; I think the art team did a great job with it. For animation we wanted something heavy on ground and light and controlled in air, to portray what Nathan's true element is.

I've always believed that the first few moments of a game are the most critical. If the character feels good and moves/animates well, it's going to be a fun ride. A good videogame character is one you can have fun with just running and walking round. You've managed to nail the physics and animation, but also somehow give Nathan dynamic animation amidst an obliterated cityscape, which really ties the player to the terrain. How big of a challenge is it to apply this tech to a world so vast and so ruined?

UA: The environment was a bitch, yes. To really expand on the swing mechanic and since it's a new way to play, we had to reinvent a lot of classical level design rule sets. We've done about four full sets of levels for this game, constantly reworking them for best result. During the level development we had to constantly evolve the swing and the other physical interaction to adapt to the ever-changing game world. I think the most time on the character-animation side went into making the character interact with the world as close to perfect we could. There are dynamic details to whatever he does, if it's running, jumping, swinging, slamming into things, getting shot, getting shot at, to name a few.

Another big surprise: Nathan jumps! Was there ever any question?

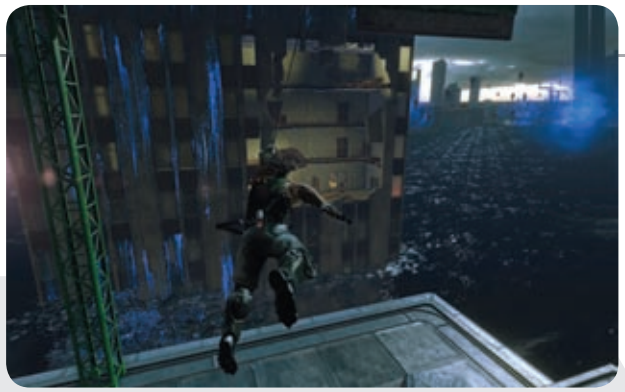
BJ: Ha-ha. Without a doubt. We tried for about three months to nail the swing mechanic without jumping, but since there is a swing arc, your feet always get snagged on the ground and you end up having to keep running to the edge of a platform just to get air and start swinging. By allowing people to jump, you can take to the skies almost instantly.

UA: Oh my God, the meetings we've had…

"By allowing people to jump, you can take to the skies almost instantly."
-Ben Judd

BC had a lot of layers for an 8-bit game, but 20 years later it's not a lot to go on when you're creating a world. Besides remixing familiar music and the basic hook and swing mechanics, how are you defining the game as a Bionic Commando sequel? If it was called "The Arm of Armageddon," would I know that it was derived from the NES Bionic Commando?

BJ: I would argue that the swing mechanic is the heart of Bionic Commando, so by giving the player the chance to swing on anything like the original, we've nailed the most important part of the original. Of course, there is the music, and it is sooooo good. From a story perspective we've got Super Joe and some "other" characters from the original. We've also added in some familiar weapons, and let's not forget things like "hacking," which were also staples of the original game. I think there is definitely enough in there to warrant the Bionic Commando brand name.



"I think that games are too easy nowadays."
-Ben Judd

There are so many means to an end in Bionic Commando. It's a game that an average player will be able to grasp and get through, possibly becoming a better gamer along the way, and for skilled players it's like the ultimate playground, where your constantly finding new ways to interact with the environments and enemy AI. Run us through the level design of the game, the thinking behind it and how the concept became the game.

BJ: I think that games are too easy nowadays. There are a lot that cater to people that are looking [more] for an interactive movie than an actual game. I don't think that you need to make a game overly hard in order to make it a challenge, but making games where people can beat them without dying a few times just seems like too much hand-holding to me. Look at this on a bigger scale. In life, you don't always get the easy path. Sometimes you get fired, blow that big shot at the golf tournament, or even end up getting your bags stolen at a Swedish Hotel (no… really!). But all of these events, while not necessarily being akin to dying in a videogame, are something that you can learn from and avoid the next time around. Without penalties, there isn't really a lot of learning that can take place. But people want deaths to be fair, and Bionic Commando has that. As a Commando you have to use your wire in a multitude of ways to find the best way through each skirmish. You can't just run into the center of six enemies and button-mash your way through. And sometimes finding the best angle of attach or the right route to take means you can easily succeed, but again sometimes you will probably die in order to learn this lesson. Fortunately, some people will learn it without dying…others may take several times. I only needed to have my bags stolen once in order to learn that lesson!

UA: The game is designed around player-controlled tempo. The idea is that if the player has several options that provide different layers of stress, he can control his playing tempo. If you want a faster game, you can make it faster. This enables the player to control his experience a bit, and it enables us to control the player experience with the options we provide. There are more advanced versions of this I'd like to try for future games we make. It's a fun approach that gives the player more freedom without making a "totally-immersive-free-roaming-bullshit-world." Yeah, I know, rant rant.

The mecha design is awesome—in fact, the art direction overall is amazing…who's responsible?
BJ: This partially came from the collaboration between the Japanese designers and GRIN designers. Japan sure does love its robots, and GRIN was able to design something that really feels robotic and powerful without being overly clunky.
UA: Something that is very close to our heart here at GRIN is good use of the color palette. Since the original title contained a lot of colors, we got the chance to go all the way with it, and we did. We use colors to enable the player to navigate the world and understand the geometry better and at the same time convey the right mood. A lot of work and great talent went into securing texture, color and ambient settings. I think it shows. The mecha style was something we ended up with because we wanted a Japanese flavor mixed with the gameplay style of the game, which is not necessarily Japanese.

Whenever I hear that a big single-player game has online features such as Deathmatch, Capture the Flag and so on, I know that 99% of the time it's a result of some spreadsheets. Games like Halo, Quake, Unreal…pretty much any fragathon, I can understand. These games are built for people who like to run and gun, but I've yet to meet an action/adventure fan who actually wants or expects such things in their games. It certainly can't hurt, but if it comes at the expense of the single-player game, that's a problem. Did you spend time and budget on online that could have allowed you to do more with the core game? Did it limit the development in any way? If not (great news), why online play? Why not spend that time creating new content for a second run-through…like a hot female character or new outfits...Is online really beneficial to a single-player experience?
BJ: I couldn't agree more. I personally do not like multiplayer games and every point you mention describes exactly how I feel. However, games are becoming more and more social nowadays, and online play is starting to become the standard. I'd imagine there will be a good deal of people who buy the game but never touch the multiplayer, but there may be some that end up picking it up one day and really, really enjoying it because the swing mechanic is so solid. I have to admit, I didn't have high hopes initially, but after I was swinging around and chasing down my coworkers while shooting them, I was having a great time. The swing mechanic not only makes single-player a lot of fun, but it also provides for a unique multiplayer experience as well. For people who don't like multiplayer, they will probably pass it up, but I would urge them to at least give it a shot first because it definitely doesn't disappoint. We had an internal team that focused on multiplayer and one that focused on single-player, so that each team could drill down on the gameplay they were aiming for. I would say the ratio is about 66:33 of single-player to multiplayer development.
UA: GRIN has a very solid multiplayer team, we play a lot of multiplayer games, and it would have been a shame if we didn't bring the wire mechanic online. There are actually a lot of benefits to doing multiplayer for a game; the biggest one is the fact that the developers can play the game during development, keeping the creativity and love for the game at its peak for a longer time. At the same time, it's always hard to care about multiple designs and multiple solutions, so we tried to design most of the multiplayer around the single-player abilities, modifying here and there to make a great online experience. I'm looking forward to seeing how good people get after a couple months of playing online. It's going to be great, getting my ass whooped in deathmatch.

Out of ammo? Zip-kick is the gift that keeps on giving.

Nasty fire-breathing giant metal worm got you down? Death from above!

"Games are my medium, I love it, always will."
-Ulf Andersson

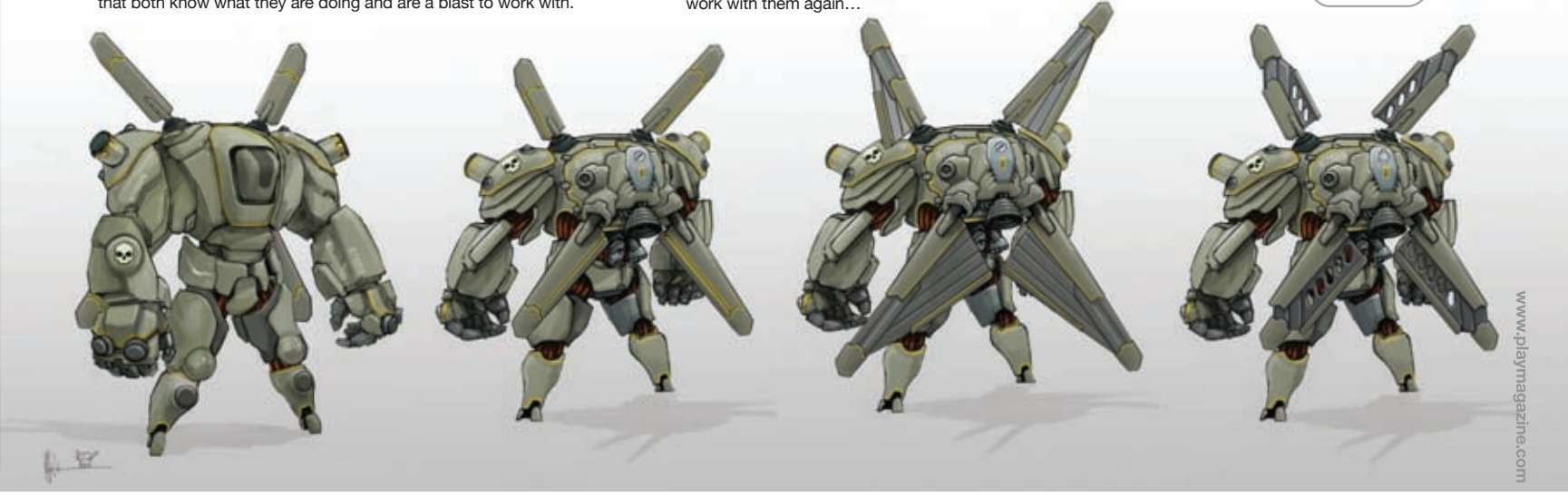
Is there a methodology or process that makes a game feel like a Capcom game? Some secret ingredient? Or is that something that died with sound chips and sprites?
BJ: Wild super moves, some RPG elements and great bosses are some of the things that I always felt defined Capcom games. Bionic Commando has them all, as well as the great shooting and free-world exploration.

Tell us about GRIN—what are you backgrounds? Are you guys/girls born and raised in Stockholm? What games were you brought up on…what systems? Was it a Mario/Sonic culture like America or more Asterix and Obelix? What's the gaming scene like there?
UA: Born and raised in Sweden, at least me. Nowadays we are a multicultural, multilingual company with offices in Sweden, Spain and Indonesia, so yeah, it's a mess…hehe. Our members have a lot of different backgrounds in gaming, but I used to play mostly Amiga (forever!) before I moved to the PC platform. I used to play a lot of NES at my friend's house, though, but I never got one.

Regarding popular games, we actually had a lot of the Mario stuff and some Sonic, mixed with all the classic C64 and Amiga games. When I got a bit older the demo scene was really booming in Sweden and we got into that, I think it was then that me and my brother found our love for development. To summarize, we used to play anything we could get our hands on. I still do, when I have the time. Games are my medium, I love it, always will.

GRIN was founded on its technology. If at all possible, can you explain what makes one engine better than another as it pertains to huge-scale environments? It's amazing how far apart games are these days. It's as if certain studios are working on better hardware. We'll see smallish worlds with rudimentary architecture plagued by low detail and/or texture popping, and then one five times bigger with beautiful textures and loads of detail. Is it all about the engine? Does the engine dictate everything within the overall construct? Where does the engine stop and great game creation begin?
UA: I'm not into the game-engine-wrangling business, so I'll try to give you my honest opinion. The engine is important, but the team and its culture is the key. Knowing your tech and working with your limits will make the big difference. So if your tech is great and you know how to use it, there is going to be a big difference in quality. I'm very fortunate to have a team that both know what they are doing and are a blast to work with.

GRIN certainly has the tech to make amazing worlds and the talent to make great games (so please become a Capcom studio and please play Strider the night before your next meeting).
UA: Strider would be a very interesting project to make. I think that amongst other great Capcom classics, it has great potential. Nothing is announced regarding our companies' future collaboration, but we'd love to work with them again…



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November 2008 REVIEWS

Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: I don't take reviewing games lightly—no siree. I get deep into a game in accord with the audience the developer is aiming to gratify, and then review from that perspective with an eye on design, artistry, animation, attention to detail, physics, audio, and functionality.
Brain Drain: I've been hearing for over a year now how "casual" gamers (what are they lazy?) are going to become a force and that we'll be seeing fewer and fewer great action games.Take away Wiible Sports and Wii-Fit and there is no casual market. These people buy Nintendo's Pet Rocks, that's it! Meanwhile I'm neck high in Fable 2, Tomb Raider Underworld, Banjo Kazooie, Golden Axe BR, Bionic Commando, Sonic Unleashed, Crash MoM, Spyro DotD, Little Big Planet, and there's incoming!
Game of the Month:
Little Big Tomb Raider: Underworld

Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space). **Brain Drain:** More and more, I think, games really should be shorter—given their current progression. Too many are really good in the first half, monotonous and protracted the second. It's as if designers construct a big hook, get this great tech up and running, and don't know where to go after act one, struggling for rising action and conflict resolutions. And they all work off this same broken template.

Game of the Month: Little Big Planet

Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!

Brain Drain: Spore is just, well. It's okay.

Game of the Month: Lego Batman: The Videogame

Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me, as it can crucially impede or compliment the flow of ideas that a game is attempting to communicate.
Brain Drain: According to recent reports, it looks like Live and PSN are quite profitable now. Microsoft is really raking it in. Nintendo can't move huge content like the aforementioned services due to the Wii's limited storage. Hey, what's this? Rock Band 2 on Wii has full DLC? Maybe a storage solution is on the way…

Game of the Month: Warhammer Online (PC)

Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe videogames can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game.
Brain Drain: Nintendo, your strategies with regard to game announcements are patently insane. According to President Satoru Iwata, "If a game is announced months before its release, the users are already bored of it by the time it comes out." Right, because games like Metal Gear Solid 4, which we've known about for four years, only manage to move a measly four million copies.
Game of the Month: World Destruction

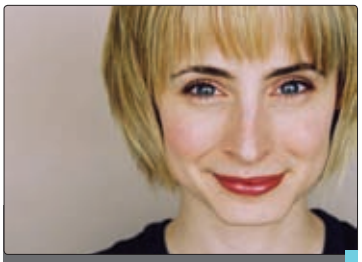
Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.
Brain Drain: Sorry, Heather, sorry, Nick, but the character design in SFIV is absolutely wretched. Capcom have also seen fit to ruin the handful of well-designed characters by giving them ridiculous tree-trunk thighs, grape-bunch arms and, in the case of the formerly attractive Chun-Li, thoroughly mannish features. Of the new characters, only Crimson Viper looks remotely interesting, and she seems tragically out of place, as if she's wandered out of King of Fighters by mistake.

Game of the Month: Valkyria Chronicles

Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.
Brain Drain: SamSho II XBLA has reminded me of why I loved the game in the first place, and may be my most enjoyable Xbox 360 game since Pac-Man CE. To this day, still a brilliant and well-balanced fighter. Phantasy Star Zero bringing PSO to the DS? Crazy, but I'll be there. Rolled a priest in WoW, loving it so far.
Game of the Month: Samurai Shodown II XBLA



Heather Campbell
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

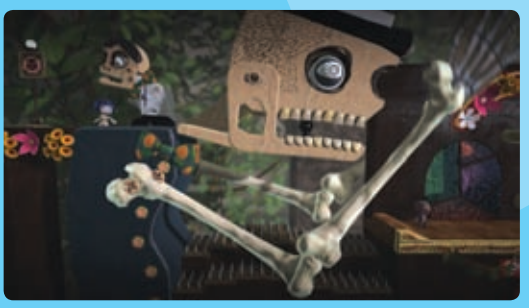
Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

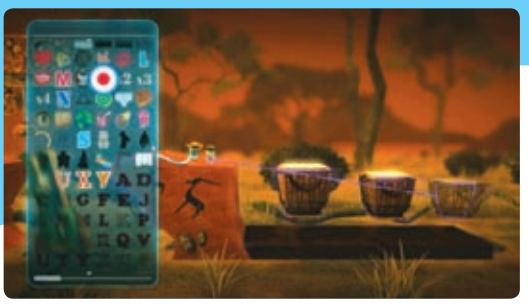
Brain Drain: So, I hear that videogames are the evergreen industry for this next Great Depression. Like film in the 1930s, games give you a pretty decent bang for your buck—100 hours for $59. Expect games to get more padded if the market keeps heading in this direction.

Game of the Month: STREET FIGHTER FOOOOUUURRRR

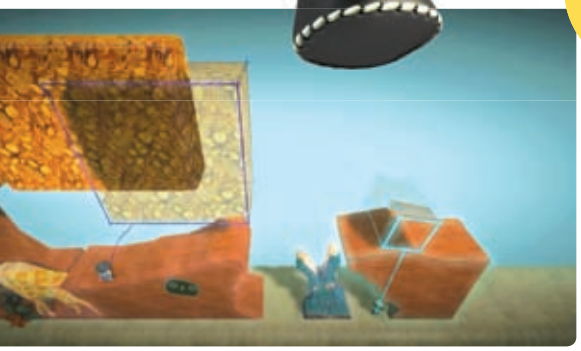
Little Big Planet

A world of possibilities





words Brady Fiechter



The omniscient narrator begins Little Big Planet with a tiny tale of dreams and the human spirit's drive for creative wonderment. We are told that the place we are about to go to is a collection of all this swirling imagination, a playpen fashioned out of the raw material of invention. It's all true.

Little Big Planet is many things—a platformer in the most traditional sense, a build-your-own engineering kit, a videogame holding on to a familiar past while soaring with modern craft. It is also, in remotely interactive ways, an allegory on what it is to be a child in adult's clothing.

The remarkable look of Little Big Planet is crucial to its success. Without the high gloss and wonderful creativity of sight and sound, the tiny cracks in the fundamental design would be seen more as gaping holes, and Little Big Planet would not get the messianic praise it is surely about to receive. So delightful and marvelous are its visuals, so emboldened by technology and exuberance for the idea of unbounded fantasy, Little Big Planet practically disarms the cry for any criticism. At its best, you are simply grateful to be experiencing so much fun and joy, like a kid again, like the first time you were introduced to a new kind of plaything. This, in no small way, is the theme the game sprinkles throughout its cycle.

Before you can start building your own spaces, the game takes you through a lengthy single-player construct, during which an enormous amount of item collecting gets under way. This is where Little Big Planet is both grand and lacking. The spongy feeling of interacting with everything is a tad off-putting, and the controls are never as natural and second-nature as you expect from the most accomplished games in the genre—and those games offer tighter, more assured fabrics of design.

But as more of the richness of what defines the experience plays out, you see that the tactile attention to physics-based object interaction and the dynamic of the controlling characters demands that we approach the game with a different lens than what we're used to. The space is a tad confining, but within that confinement this delightful little world plays out just as it should, and there are moments when you feel like a part of you is living that time in your head when you wanted so badly to get in that little Matchbox car and ramp over a stack of blocks.

Playing Little Big Planet solo is one thing, stepping into this world with friends is really where it's at. For a game that's been so heavily sold on the creation tools, I found that this part of the Little Big Planet package is the sideshow that simply can't be explored fully as a "review." This is where your own imagination makes or breaks it, just as certain levels in Little Big Planet are awesome and certain ones are merely average. Certainly there will be even more robust tools down the road that will put this watershed effort to shame, but until then...

"The remarkable look of Little Big Planet is crucial to its success."

parting shot

Soft controls and frustrating stretches can only do so much harm to an overall game of wild visual imagination and character rarely seen in a videogame. Tons of fun.

Golden Axe: Beast Rider

Beauty and the beasts

words Dave Halverson

Of all the brands that helped form the Sega mystique and ultimately jettison them past Nintendo (with a little help from a certain blue hedgehog) during a time when doing so seemed unachievable, Golden Axe is among the most revered and has remained untainted by a potentially damaging 3-D makeover for 20 years.

How fitting, then, that it would arrive during Sega's most pivotal year since losing its mojo by ditching the Dreamcast and disbanding its star dev teams Smilebit and Team Andromeda.

2008 has seen Sega of America finally come into its own, emerging as the strong link in the chain working in harmony (sayonara, discord!) with a more Western-savvy SoJ. Thanks to new brands like Viking: Battle for Asgard, MadWorld, Bayonetta, Alpha Protocol and Valkyria Chronicles, and revivals befitting their namesake such as NiGHTS (although it landed on the wrong hardware), Sonic Unleashed and Golden Axe: Beast Rider, Sega's finally beginning to feel like "Sega" again (now everyone, please stay put). After acquiring the Creative Assembly in 2005, Sega struck gold again in 2006 when they got their hands on Secret Level; two years later and we're looking at the best 3-D update of an arcade classic in the company's history.

Sizing up Beast Rider is as easy as breaking down its most fervent benefactors, including game-savvy button-pounders raised on arcade games and *Heavy Metal* magazine, anyone of the opinion that there's nothing quite as intoxicating as a beautiful half-naked woman riding bareback on a snarling beast, and, of course, 13-year-old boys praying for a prehistoric wardrobe malfunction. Like all great action games worth their weight in severed body parts, Golden Axe: Beast Rider sticks to what fantasy/action game fans desire: fierce nuanced gameplay big on technique, dazzling visuals and buckets of blood, with no added fillers or (online) by-products. Secret Level has succeeded in staying true to the Golden Axe series fundamentals while crafting a superb modern-day action game, which is no easy task. Beast Rider couldn't merely look good or merely play good; it had to excel in both areas, and the less a studio has to work with in terms of complexity, the better their game has to be. When you're creating a massive game based on three core elements, there is no room for error.

Beast Rider is a pure action game, free of prompts, navigation, wordy cinematics, quick time events, inventory screens or item management, and based on swordplay, beast riding and magic—period. In an era of games stuffed with excess and all manner of diversions to draw the player out of the game, Secret Level have forged those fundamentals into an enormous game that sucks you in and keeps you riveted by constantly building on its core while traversing some of the most grandiose panoramas ever produced out of polygons. Not panoramas as in periodically peering over a great expanse—the "levels" in Beast Rider are panoramas; you can always see the entire region. It oozes seventh-generation technology.

The swordplay is rooted in mastering a simple block-and-parry system relative to the unyielding barrage of foes that evolve with each passing challenge. Attacks emitting an orange glow depict a magic strike requiring a well-timed (L1) evasion maneuver; and a blue glow, a weapon strike requiring a (R1) parry—both of which can be followed up by X, square or both to perform varying degrees of counters. A perfectly timed sword parry against a pack of armored skeletons, for instance, will vanquish the lot, while a simultaneous X/square counter will perform a "knock back," sending a single enemy flying back. As a rule, wherever there's a glistening steel spike there needs to be a body. The only "puzzles" in Golden Axe are meat puzzles. Tyris can also deflect projectiles and evade ranged attacks. It's a simple system made absolutely invigorating through deft enemy placement, behavior and design (oh, the design) and pitch-perfect balance in accord with the game's other two elements—magic and beast riding. Tyris wields earth (as in shattering) and fire (as in projectile) magic—along with the Golden Axe, which plays an increasingly greater role as she pieces it together—that gain strength as she pays tribute to her fallen clan. Rather than one long, continuous, checkpoint-peppered stretch, Secret Level mix up the gameplay (repetition never has a chance) and provide save points by segmenting the game's massive areas into challenges, rating your performance, and tallying tribute (spoils of war contained within glowing pottery or derived from proficient kills) before sending you on your way. As skillfully as Secret Level have designed the world and orchestrated the action, however, were it not for the game's menagerie of beasts, it wouldn't have been enough to make it a true seventh-generation experience. Not only are beasts plentiful, they're far more than the glorified power-ups of old. Beast riding is one thing, but beast mastery is another. Carefully scrutinizing the environment, its enemies, and each beast's strengths and weaknesses is the difference between a 30-second rampage and a five- to ten-minute onslaught, mowing through hardy opponents and cracking open beast chests filled with tribute. Beasts are also used for stealth, to break barriers, trigger switches and solve the odd terrain-based puzzle…but most of all they are absolutely wondrous to behold. Each has a distinct personality and is so realistically devised that you'd think they were pulled from prehistory. The eyes seem alive, they have teeth and tongues, their skin stretches and contorts, sliding over

"Like all great action games worth their weight in severed body parts, Golden Axe: Beast Rider sticks to what fantasy/action game fans desire..."

every muscle, they have distinct grunts and breathing, and the texture work (let's just call it skin) is impeccable. I'm surprised they don't crap; that's how real they are. Amazingly, the same level of detail carries over into nearly every facet of the design. There's normal and bump mapping and then there's whatever the heck Secret Level is coating sun-drenched bones, aged wood, iron, steel, and stone with to make it look like you could strike a match on it. The texture work is extraordinary. So go Death Adders minions. The first two bosses (his lovely twin offspring) are what medieval wet dreams are made of: Beast summoners conjure massive batlike monstrosities and rickety legions of amazingly articulated skeleton warriors, and in between every foul creature, from the lowliest grunt to Adder's most elite knights, is meticulously modeled and animated.

Be sure to take a good long look at the banshees, and when you're not busy trying to kill her, the Queen of the Dead. May I have another, and another… Not only is she the perfect picture of evil, her throne is a work of genius (somebody modeled that?!) and her arena the kind of place every medieval fantasy fan dreams of doing battle in. She's the last of Death Adder's generals before embarking on Fiends Path; the beginning of the end—although the journey is long from over, through the kind of last level we used to get on 16-bit that made the rest of the game pale in comparison. I'll leave it at that. I'm amazed at how long a game Beast Rider turned out to be and at the amount of bonus features they were able to stuff in. The "Trials of Tyris" levels that open with each passing chapter are the ultimate training grounds for mastering techniques and each enemy type; you can view all the cinematics, some of which are quite spectacular (Gilius and Axe Battler both make appearances), and try on all the wonderful outfits you and Tyris have worked so diligently to unlock. Tyris attire changes for every stage, but you can also earn outfits to wear in the Trials, some of which offer little protection.

Alas, there are a few flies circling the ointment, but they never land. Tyris is a beautiful heroine; so beautiful, in fact, that the absence of dynamic animation is all the more puzzling. Her distinctive walk and run, separate animations for every beast (and there really isn't anything more intoxicating than a beautiful half-naked woman riding bareback on a snarling beast) and superb battle movement make the flat stance on sloped surfaces and steps a real head-scratcher. Her boobs are motionless until you reach Fiends Path, too, after which they have subtle natural animation, but I'm guessing that's due to the detail on her various tops. Some flies, eh? Damn limited boob animation! The only real complaint I'm going to file is the music. I dig the whole tribal percussion thing, and it's done well, but I'd prefer something more ominous, a dark orchestral score perhaps...totally subjective. And that's about all I've got. I could write another page on things I love about Beast Rider, like how bloody cool it looks when Tyris slices a body in two or hacks off an arm, subtle homages like scampering gnomes and thorny spikes, the naked body parts that Death Adder's minions use for decoration, how the game runs like a dream on PS3, and how awesome it is that the single-player experience wasn't compromised to add some bogus online crapola, but I think my work here is done.

parting **shot**

If you know who Frank Frazetta, Simon Bisley or Tarna are, or read *Heavy Metal* magazine, you don't need a parting shot; you need $59.99 plus tax and a car. For everybody else, if you like unsullied action games, beautiful heroines, large pissed-off beasts, or laying waste to evil undead hordes and the earth-plundering demons they work for, you will love Golden Axe: Beast Rider. And if you love them all, buy two for yourself and one for everyone you know as Christmas presents, whether they have a console or not, to assure we get another.

System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC | **Developer:** Electronic Arts | **Publisher:** Electronic Arts | **ESRB:** M | **Available:** Now

Dead Space

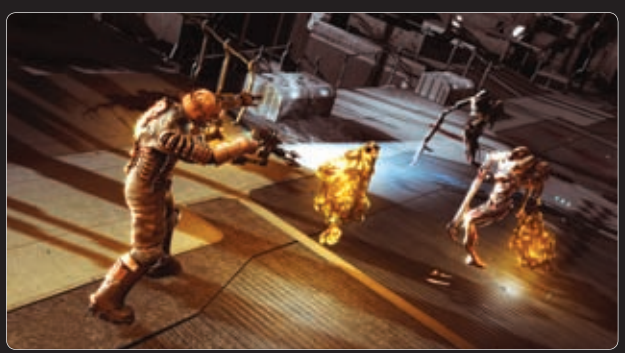
Oh how I love the Dead Space

words Dave Halverson

Approaching the massive "Planet Cracker" Starship USG Ishimura to investigate a distress signal and subsequent communications blackout, the likelihood that a derelict lifeform had systematically slaughtered the crew and mutated their corpses into bloodthirsty necromorphs probably never crossed C.E.C. engineer Isaac Clarke's mind. Maybe he should have watched the animated movie before takeoff...

Having watched the animated feature (and liking it plenty), I couldn't wait to step onto the deck of the Ishimura to see what I couldn't in the animation...the rest of the carnage and whatever piousness might be at work. This is no ordinary xenomorph. This hungry host has dogmatic implications and kills first, then hijacks your corpse later. But on with the game, or as I like to refer to it, Isaac Clarke's series of unfortunate events. Not only did Isaac crash-land on a ship where he's the main course, but he no sooner finds himself alone with only the voices of his security detail (all two of them) to guide him. One man on a ship so massive it has its own railway, to get the systems back online. It doesn't take a genius to see where this is going. EA Redwood Shores lock themselves into a laundry-list corridor creepy crawler from the get go; it's where they take it that makes Dead Space one of the best things to happen to survival horror since they coined the phrase. The goal is simple: survive the horror, which in this case means dealing with the mother of all mutated abominations. Before you can kill them, you have to stop them, which means popping or slicing off limbs before they reach you—and these aren't lumbering zombies—and then finishing them off (you might want to throw in a stomp for good measure too); at least at the outset, before the wall runners, spitters, tentacles, armored behemoths and so on begin to crawl

"The 'shooting' in Dead Space is part pant-wetting fear and part adrenaline rush..."

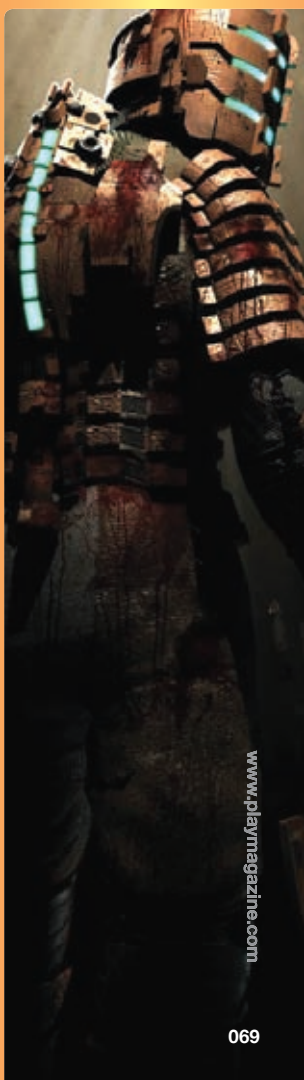


out of the steel work. The "shooting" in Dead Space is part pant-wetting fear and part adrenaline rush thanks to some of the most stunning sound design and atmosphere ever burned onto disc, in concert with an enemy that actually scares the piss out of you. That's if you consider it shooting at all. My weapon of choice, the "Ripper" (plus a pile of Nodes), fires a hovering saw blade. Equipped on the D-Pad along with the Line Gun, Pulse Rifle, and Flamethrower, I still felt about as secure as a chicken on a Zacky Farm. Isaac can also use Stasis to freeze time, Kinesis to kinetically move heavy objects, and his suit, the Rig, is a formidable piece of gear in its own right that doubles nicely as a status indicator with Health and Stasis energy gauges built right in. Every weapon, ability, and the Rig itself can be augmented by collecting Nodes and credits and visiting either a store or "bench"—both practical fixtures among the Ishimura's many connecting decks. You actually place your gun to use the bench and each time you upgrade the suit Isaac physically enters an apparatus for the new application; great design. The menus (map, mission status etc.) are similarly ingenious, presented as holographic images projected from Isaac's helmet, allowing you to survey the map or watch audio files on the move. Also note how his head moves ever so slightly up and down as you cycle...detail. There are those who will say that the gopher aspect of the gameplay wears thin although I would vehemently disagree given the diversity within the ship's massive interior (each area looks completely unique among what is easily the best interior design of its kind; atmosphere like this is beyond rare) and the evolution of the enemy in concert with the mission structure, which had me in a constant state of paranoia. Between the exploration (seek out med packs, ammo, and credits or you will die), bouts of anti-gravity (too cool) extermination, puzzle solving, and the story, as videogame tinged as it may be, I found myself riveted for the duration. The 2-minute shooting piece within Chapter 4, "Obliteration Imminent," was a bit of a stretch but the mission itself is privy to one of the most breathtaking looks at a meteor shower any space-age daydreamer could ever hope for. Another brilliant touch—maybe my favorite among a game I consider groundbreaking in the area of art direction—comes by way of simply pressing the right analog, which lets out a perfectly pitched chirp and lays down a laser- thin blue line pointing the way. So subtle and so useful. My advice? Don't follow it verbatim; the Ishimura is full of surprises. Is the game bloody? Immensely. Gross? Incredibly. Overly so... not a chance. Just show me where they are.

parting **shot**

A visual powerhouse of a game adorned with superb menu systems, a wealth of gameplay devices and scenarios given the genre, brilliant sound design and some of the most grotesque goop-spurting nastiness imagineable. May I please have another?

The Rig; suits Isaac just fine.



System: Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Rare | **Publisher:** Microsoft | **Rated:** E 10+ **Available:** November 11

Banjo Kazooie: Nuts and Bolts

Rare dare to change their Bear

words Dave Halverson

Kameo: Elements of Power is one of my all-time favorite games. DKC, Jet Force Gemini, Star Fox Adventure, Banjoe Kazooie, Conker Live & Reloaded, and Super Battletoads are all up there too, but Kameo was significant for two reasons. I was 99% sure it would be my first and last big hub-based platformer (my preferred genre) on 360, and (as such) it was everything I'd hoped for and more. Nobody makes them like Rare, and it's likely nobody ever will again. Fortunately, I've recently discovered that the Trademark Rare gameplay I've treasured all these years didn't die with the genre, at least not completely...

The establishing scene in Nuts & Bolts finds Banjo and Kazooie kicking back on Spiral Mountain not 50 ft. from where they finally defeated Gruntilda, where they've been playing Xbox 360 and eating Lardo's pizza ever since, becoming very fat and very lazy in the process. So fat and lazy that when Gruntilda's severed head comes back to life and pops out of the rubble there's not a whole lot they can do about it. Enter L.O.G. (as in Lord of Games), the grand creator of all videogames, even ones that don't sell very well like Ghoulies (clever Rare retort No.1), who poses a challenge. To the winner goes Spiral Mountain and to the loser an eternity of toil in his videogame factory. The challenge? Collecting as many pointless objects as possible (clever Rare retort No. 2) of course! And away they go waddling down the path until L.O.G. exclaims, "No, no, no… It's too painful to watch.

Gamers today don't want all this, they just want to shoot things! But as we're broadening the demographic, I'll have to think of something original. Hmmmm." (I'd call that clever Rare retort No. 3). This is either Rare taking a piss on Rare, or Rare taking a piss on people that take a piss on the Rare formula that made Nintendo trillions. My guess would be the latter (and that'll do it for the retort counting, too many to count anyway). Deciding they should settle their feud once and for all in a brand new game world "considerably more impressive than anything you've seen before," L.O.G. gives them their physiques back but no moves—"They were rather outdated"—and away we go to Showdown Town to start the game!

The rules are simple enough. Banjo and Kazooie must collect Jiggies ("collect" being the operative word) and deposit them in the Jiggy bank. Each time they deposit the required number of Jiggies to open a world a Globe will drop somewhere, which they'll need to load into their trolley and place on the Plinth of the corresponding world. Collect all the Jiggies to open all the worlds and they win. For Gruntilda to win all she has to do is, of course, stop them. Banjo is given a magic wrench, Grunty gets a strange purple creature named "Piddles," and off you go.

First order of business, telekinetically grab a crate and set in the square by Mumbo's garage, so he can open it up and tell you what parts are inside. Besides collecting Jiggies Banjo also needs to take any crates he finds and bring them to Mumbo—which is easier said than done, this is a BIG place—to use to build all the wonderful vehicles you'll be needing to play the vehicle-based challenges in each world. If you like building, you're in luck—it's a snap to learn and I dare you to ever stop—but if not, you're in luck too. Mumbo's hot wife will sell you blueprints to vehicles that go directly into your inventory. Some need a few parts but you won't be spending much time at Mumbo's.

Was I worried at this point? Heck yes! At this point I already know that I'm not getting a platformer…far from it. In fact I smell a "casual game," although I'm going so completely nuts over Showdown Town—next-gen Rare worlds kill me—I'm not sure if I care. Off to Nutty Acres. Arriving in the massive storybook patchwork land dripping with shiny Rare visual bliss, the first few challenges —simple driving/racing exercises—go down in minutes. Time to leave. Time to leave?! Why'd they frickin' make this monster then?! And so it goes for about, oh, another 45 minutes. By that time I've caught on. Ultimately the challenges get better—way better, and incorporate all manner of tank, plane, hovercraft, racecar, motorcycle, helicopter, and vehicles that only exist for the game, but the "gameplay" is everywhere. It's all over Showdown Town and buried within every world.

I think Rare built a Rare game inside of a casual game… that's not casual. The challenges take big skills after a short while, and a lot of the Jiggies and crates require mad platforming. The world itself is just huge. So huge I don't know how huge because it's going to take a long while to open it all. And the themed worlds are so stuffed with lakes, airspace, and pockets of grandeur to explore (and retorts of course), it's like Christmas in October. And L.O.G. just keeps getting funnier…the whole game does. The writing is hilarious, it's like Cranky Kong with a chip on his shoulder (well, a bigger chip), and the strangely shaped pigs, rhinos, and other creatures mulling about are total freaks.

Maybe Rare aren't as much of a big deal they used to be (although you might wanna check the numbers on Viva Piñata before you flap your lips) and maybe I'll never get another big Rare platformer, but at least I'm not running around as an arm and a gun shooting anybody that moves like some murderous automaton.

"I think Rare built a Rare game inside of a casual game…that's not casual."

A rare interview with Rare

Answered by Banjo-Kazooie series Creative Director Gregg Mayles

I sent a pretty stuffed list of questions to my beloved embedded Brits, many (most) of which were plucked out somewhere along the line. We'll never know what all the retorts really mean, exactly what went down when they were made to clean-up Kameo's sexy body, or if Nintendo ever realized that Vela's fellas jiggled away on Nintendo 64, but I can hire a mole for that.

So with the new Banjo, did you begin making a more traditional Rare action game and then change gears—and if so can you say why—or is Nuts & Bolts style of gameplay simply where you see the franchise going?

Yes, we did begin with a very traditional game because that is what we had been familiar with and had enjoyed success with in the past. The original idea that we worked on for a short while was a unique remake of Banjo-Kazooie, where although everything looked as you remembered it (but in higher definition of course), we would actually change what happened. For instance, in Banjo-Kazooie's first world, Mumbo's Mountain, there is a giant termite hill that small termites live in. When playing the 'new' Banjo-Kazooie, the termite hill would seem the same but then the top would suddenly break open and a giant queen termite would poke her head out and start causing trouble. But even with this novel approach, we felt it was still just a remake and it relied too much on game mechanics that felt outdated.

So we approached it from a different angle. Rather than giving players the same abilities and solving the game's tasks in exactly the same way, why couldn't the players choose their abilities and then tackle the tasks using their own unique method? This 'choice of abilities' idea became the vehicle parts and the ball started rolling from there. Even so, I think players will discover the game still has sufficient traditional elements that they expect of a Banjo game - it's just that we've shaken them up and evolved them.

It's a little too early to say where the franchise will go next. Our aim was to reintroduce Banjo in a way that offers something new in its genre, and that would appeal to old and new fans alike. Hopefully we have achieved that first step. We're looking forward to what players think of Nuts & Bolts and then we'll see where we go from there.

How broad an audience are you looking for [with Nuts & Bolts]? Is this new framework more for an older audience or younger?

As broad as possible. We envisage that players will fall roughly into one of three groups, so we tried to ensure that the game offers suitable entertainment for them all. The first group is the younger players. For this group, the game provides pre-built vehicles for them to use until they learn the necessary skills to build their own. They can also play with their parents, who can help them build the vehicle they want and then the child can use it. This younger group will probably not be interested in multiplayer. I recently tested the game on my 6 year old nephew and although he didn't want to build vehicles (much to my annoyance), he absolutely loved using them. He spent two hours just driving around one of the worlds, fooling about with the

"We're looking forward to what players think of Nuts & Bolts and then we'll see where we go from there." - Gregg Mayles

pre-built vehicles and interacting with characters and objects in the background.
The second group is the casual players. They will want to complete as much of the game as possible, and will collect only some of the vehicle parts in order to build whatever vehicle is required to win the progress-controlling Jiggy, and then they will immediately move onto the next Challenge. Some of them will want to play multiplayer and will appreciate the fact that we have included two modes – one where you can use any vehicle that you have built and one where everyone has to use vehicles provided by the game (which creates a level playing field).
The third group is the hardcore players. They will want to find all the vehicle parts and will constantly rebuild their vehicles to try and win the T.T. Trophies (that are awarded for completing a Challenge to a performance level above the Jiggy) as well as get on the Leaderboards. Most of them will want to prove that they have built the best vehicles by competing in the multiplayer using their own creations. During the final few weeks of development, I've spent hours trying all kinds of different tactics and vehicle iterations to complete individual Challenges, only to see some crafty team member or tester come up with something that was far superior—a great annoyance and incentive to do better all rolled into one.
There might actually be a fourth group. Those that don't want to play the game at all and just want to build cool stuff! But that's great, as there are not many games where you can have fun by not actually playing the game "properly!"

I know loads people over 20 that LOVE Viva Piñata, but can't find anyone 8-13 who's into it... It's got an avant-garde quality about it. Why do you suppose that is? And why don't publishers notice?
That's the first time I've heard a Rare game and avant-garde mentioned in the same sentence! It is an accurate observation though, and it did surprise us how many "older" players took to VP. We knew there would be some, but not the significant cult following it has picked up. We have seen that it appeals to players that many Xbox 360 games do not. There are wives and girlfriends playing the game on their partner's Xbox 360, parents playing with children and even couples that have played the game together (two of whom got married in doing so).
I think one possible reason why the 8-13 age group may not be so into the game is that they are at an age where they want to appear older than they are. They want to play the "cool" games that their older siblings/friends/adverts indicate they should be playing. Only when you reach a certain age do you begin to think more as an individual and make your own choices – that's when it becomes cool to actually like games like VP!
In hindsight, the original game was also a bit too complex and difficult for players under the age of 10, so this is something that has been addressed in the recently released sequel, Viva Piñata: Trouble in Paradise. There's also a Co-Op mode that allows players to garden together, so now younger players can have just as much VP fun as their avant-garde older counterparts.
I think many publishers are reluctant or not in a position to take risks with games like Viva Piñata, as there are always safer options available. For the games industry to move forward, I believe it is essential to keep looking for new ways of playing games, either within existing genres or trying to push the boundaries of what game

"I think many publishers are reluctant or not in a position to take risks with games like Viva Piñata..."

genres actually are. Fortunately, Microsoft realizes that they need a wide variety of games to define the Xbox 360 as an entertainment device for everyone, so they were willing to let us spend ages messing about with a load of paper animals until a game emerged from them.

What engine is this? And how long have you been toiling away?
The engine is a hybrid that has been in constant development at Rare for a number of years. It was originally written from scratch by the Grabbed by the Ghoulies/Banjo-Tooie team (yes, it's that old). During Viva Piñata we added some new elements from Rare's in house R1 engine (as used in Kameo), then during Nuts & Bolts the team added some more to it. The graphics rendering, audio, animation and file system all are supplied by Rare's Shared Technology Group.

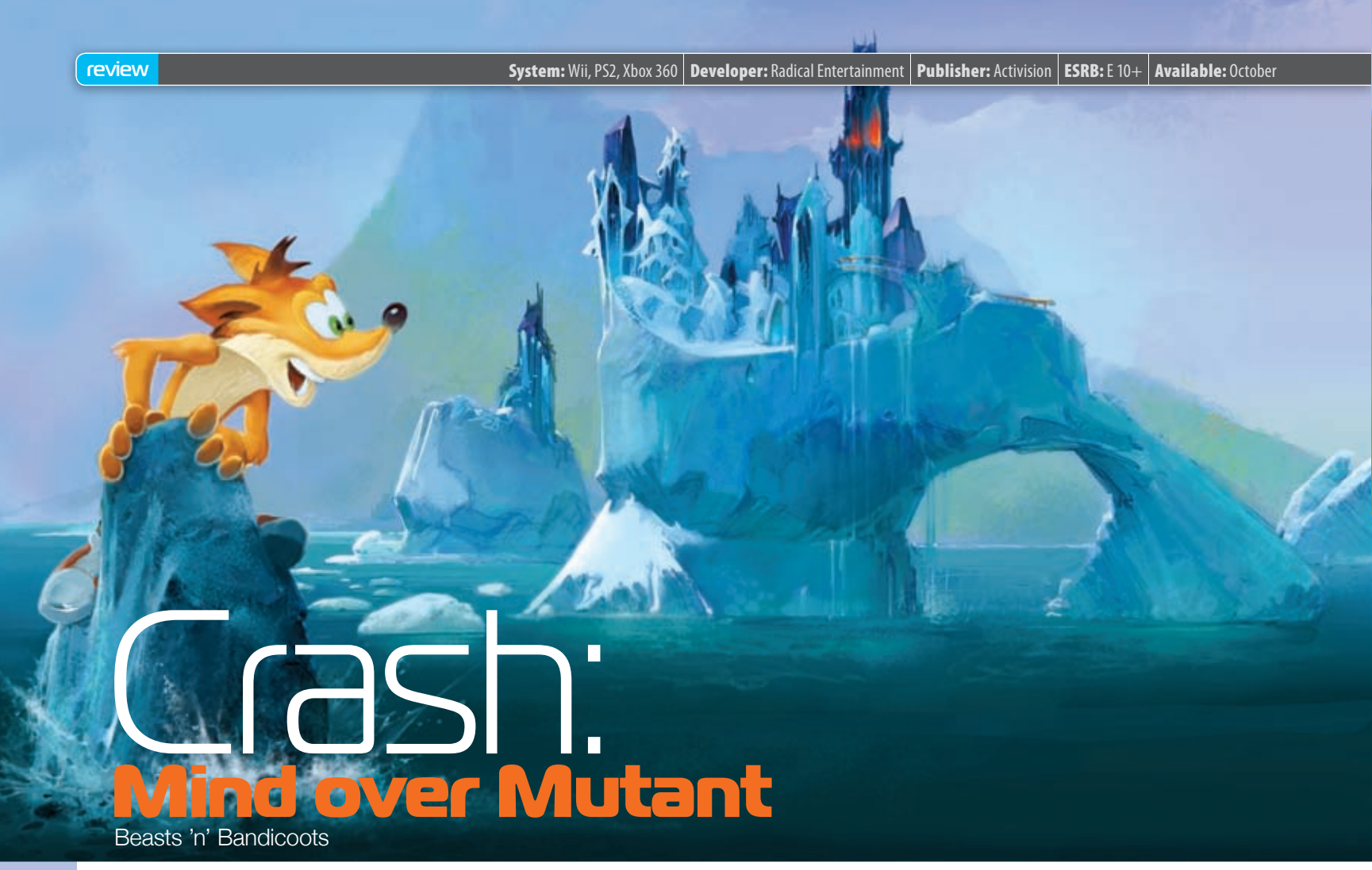
Finally, the User Interface & Localization tools come from Microsoft Game Studios. The sticky tape that holds it all together is from the stationary room. During the development of Viva Piñata, a small group broke off to start work on Banjo. The group remained small for quite a while as we went through the prototyping and iteration process that led us to Nuts & Bolts. Once the direction was established and the design in place, the team increased in size and the vast majority of the production work was done in about 18 months.

Two of the many things I love about Rare games are how tight they feel, and the little touches that you always seem to tend to no matter how massive the scale, like the way Banjo shakes off water after a swim, or how the dummy fills with air and deflates when he hops out of his seat… What does it take to refine to such a degree? Aren't your teams relatively small too? What makes that "Rare" difference?
That's actually quite a tough question to answer, as it is something that has become second nature to us and something that we don't always consciously plan. I think a lot of it comes down to the fact that everyone has great pride in what they are doing and wants to make their work the best it can be. Sometimes we do purposely try and include things in our game that maybe won't be noticed immediately, or will only become obvious if someone points them out or you play the game a subsequent time – but other times it is down to individuals going the extra mile on their own initiative to add this attention to detail. I'm still finding things in Nuts & Bolts that I never knew about and it's great.

Who did the writing [of dialogue] in "Nuts & Bolts"?
Having wrote much of the dialogue for the first two Banjo games myself, I'd like to claim that I did it. But I can't, as this time it was handled by our resident webmaster, Mr. Pants creator and all round sarcastic nice guy, Leigh Loveday. While Leigh and myself share a similar sense of humor, his grammar is annoyingly better than mine—but I do have considerably more hair than he does. I actually think that the writing in Nuts & Bolts is the best in a Banjo game yet.

How do you approach discussions with MGS about what's next for Rare following Banjo's release?
We used to do it with a bout of boxing, but MGS hired this really big Irish guy as a Producer that we didn't stand a chance against. Nowadays we all sit down with some tea and scones and discuss the future like ladies and gentlemen (while planning how to defeat their champion). Actually, it's quite simple. As a platform provider, the games that MGS creates have to offer something the other platforms don't. As game creators, Rare looks to create the games that we think that MGS needs to achieve this.

System: Wii, PS2, Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Radical Entertainment | **Publisher:** Activision | **ESRB:** E 10+ | **Available:** October



Crash: Mind over Mutant

Beasts 'n' Bandicoots

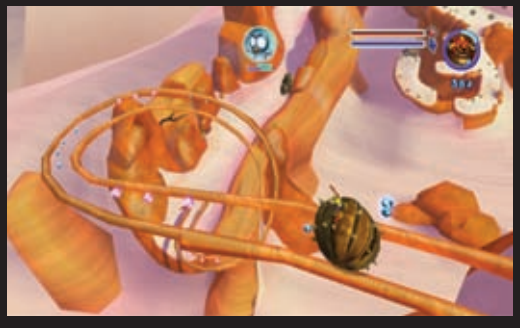
words Dave Halverson

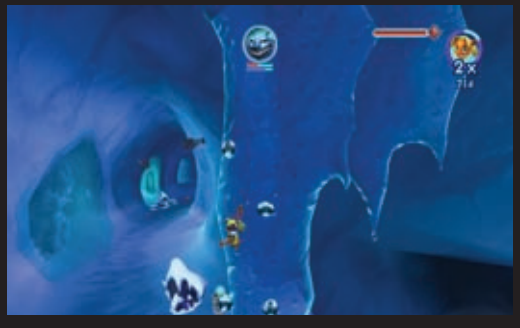
It's been a rough road for gaming's one and only world-renowned bandicoot since he crashed onto the gaming scene on such a high that lows were bound to follow. On top of starring in a multimillion-selling game so graphically superior to anything on the PlayStation that it looked like Naughty Dog cheated, Crash Bandicoot was also the first American videogame character to officially catch on and break the million-sold mark in Japan. Where do you go from there?

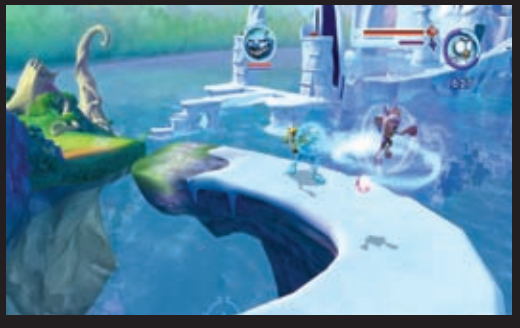
Well, first you do a sequel, then another and then another, followed by a cart-racing game to keep the fans revved up until the PS2 arrives. Then Sony buys Naughty Dog and it's bye-bye überstudio, hello obscure collection of minigames courtesy of Eurocom. That would be the low. Crash Bash bashed all right; bashed us fans right in the nuggets. Six games of varying degrees of dubiousness later between Eurocom, Vicarious Visions and Traveller's Tales (who actually made a run at it with Twinsanity), Crash landed at Radical Entertainment, where, after the hurried hybrid Tag Team Racing—their first attempt at resuscitating the patient—Crash of the Titans finally returned some of the luster to Crash's mangy orange coat.

As hopeful as I was that Radical's follow-up would mark the series' thoroughbred 360 debut, there's something to be said for the way Radical

"Mind over Mutants is a strikingly beautiful game, in its own way."







transforms simple cross-platform architecture into living art. At a standstill, the vast majority of the game's panoramas would be just as at home hanging on the wall as they are in the game, yet up-close surfaces like sand and stone exhibit fine detail. The models would look dazzling with a coat of practical skin, fur and fabric, too, if not a few thousand more polygons, but they also possess an artistry that makes them resonate at a level consistent with much more sophisticated games. Mind over Mutants is a strikingly beautiful game, in its own way.

On the gameplay front, Radical take everything that worked in Titans, which was most of it, and pump it up, beginning with the Titans themselves, who aren't just for jacking anymore. They still want to eat Crash and he still needs to jack them, but they're less key adversary and more central to progression in concert with the numerous landscapes. For instance, you've probably traversed your share of physics-based chutes before, but I'm betting never on a monster capable of flame-spewing turbo-traversing all manner of Sonic-style momentum-based mayhem. As Crash (and either Coco or Aku Aku, if you so desire) scamper to and fro within the game's network of branching arteries, it's always a good idea to have the right monster in your pocket. You can ride one and store one, and although the game's AI is generous when you're stuck, you never know when you're going to need to freeze a river, or telepathically toss a few grunts aside (although you should have a listen first—man, are they funny). It's not all about the beasts, though. Crash and Coco have plenty to do on their own, and like the Titans (if you're on one) can level-up their attacks, spin duration and power, etc. Melee combat is as crisp and as fun as ever via Crash's dorky elastic combos, and the jumping is buoyant and accurate. Crash and Coco can also ledge run, tunnel underground, bound up narrow passages and traverse vertical walls. As a rule, the Titans can usually get you where you're going, but much of the time the missions themselves—oh yeah, Neo Cortex is trying to take over the world with mail-order mind control—require the skills of a bipedal bandicoot. Expect platforming of the coolest kind, and lots of it.

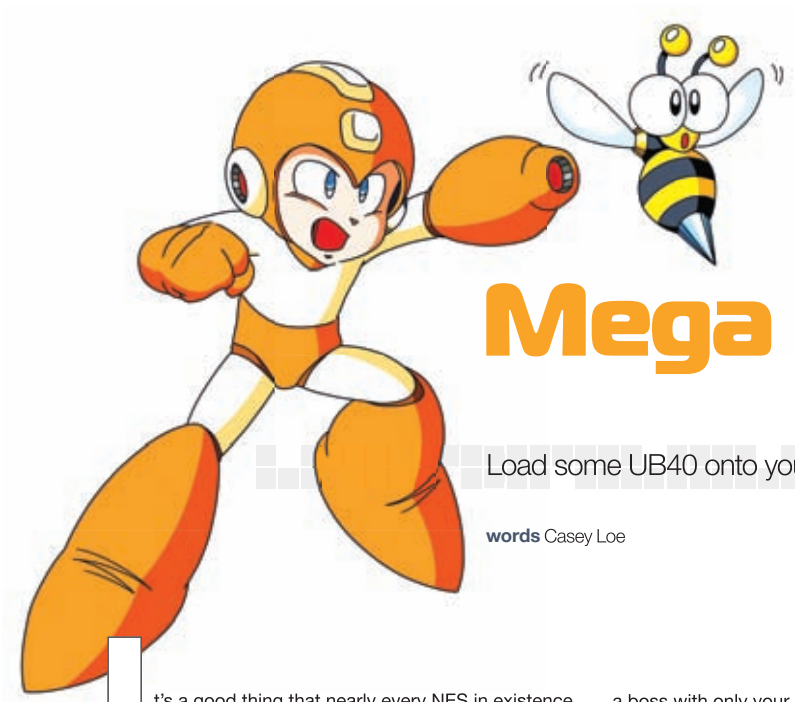
So, the game is great: very big, very fun, full of cool play mechanics and platforming, and really, really pretty. But best for last, I shit you not: The cartoons that make up the story put the majority of in-game productions to shame, some that probably cost as much as this whole game. You know it's on when you hear N-Gin; it's Ren!" Buy it to have a laugh and love it because it's also a supercool game. How's that?

As much as I'll never forget the seminal PlayStation Crash Bandicoot, I'm completely sold on the new zanier Titan-based format. Radical, dudes.

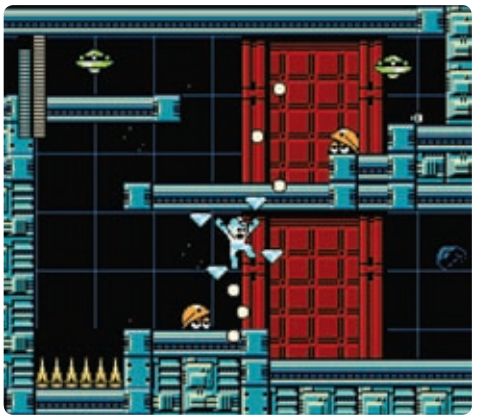
parting shot

What Radical started with Titans, nudging the series away from convention into the loving arms of cartoon avant-garde, they finish with Mind over Mutants. Cooler Titans that figure into the gameplay more, great platforming that builds for the duration, huge seamless world, incredible cartoon story line . . . music is awesome, too. It's not a fast-paced game, it's very long and it's on the easy side, but if you likey the Crash, you gonna likey this game.

System: Wii, PS3, Xbox 360 (download) | **Developer:** Capcom | **Publisher:** Capcom | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Now



Mega Man 9



Load some UB40 onto your custom soundtracks and let Mega Man take you back to 1989

words Casey Loe

"Mega Man 9 is more than a tribute—it's its own game, and a worthy addition to the series."

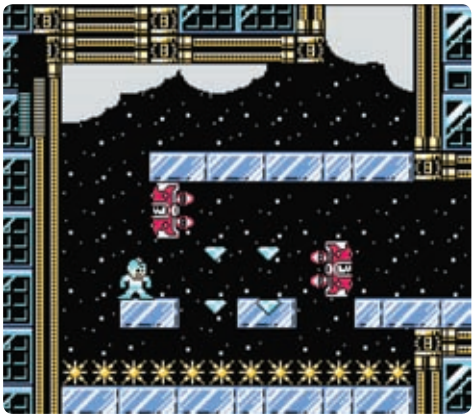
It's a good thing that nearly every NES in existence self-destructed in the mid-to-late '90s, because it protected us from having to accept a difficult truth: NES games were actually pretty awful. Oh, sure, Metroid, Zelda, Castlevania and Mega Man were among the highlights of my youth, but whenever I fire up the Wii Virtual Console to play some highly regarded NES game that I missed back in the day, I'm invariably shocked by how bad it is. I can only assume that the classics I remember so fondly are no different—they hold up today primarily due to the deep nostalgia we feel for them.

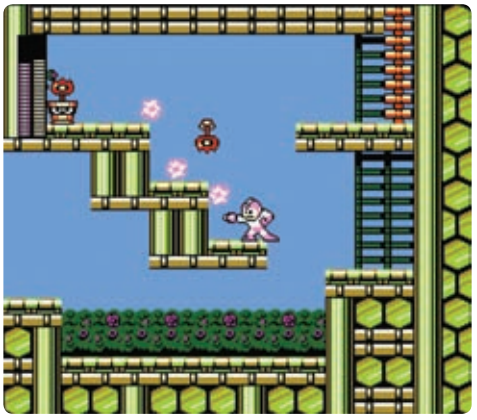
If the Mega Man series holds a similar place in your heart, you'll love Mega Man 9, which succeeds spectacularly at going back in time and inserting a new entry into the NES era of the series. But if you don't have that history with Mega Man, you'll likely be baffled as to why any modern developer would intentionally pack a game with so many obvious flaws.

As a fan of the series—but not a fanatic—I found that Mega Man 9 is in some ways exactly the game I hoped it would be. It perfectly re-creates the look of old Mega Man games, with graphics that are mostly authentic to the era and packed with 8-bit in-jokes, like when a background suddenly color-shifts as a new palette is swapped in. It also re-creates the feel of the earlier, lower-tech games, in which developers relied on tight level design to transform system limitations into game mechanics (such as scrolling an enemy out of the screen so it ceases to exist), and having to pick off a boss with only your starting weapon was a grueling challenge. But Mega Man 9 does more than just ape its predecessors—it copies the fundamentals of the classics while staking out its own identity by focusing more on puzzles and gimmicks than any previous game in the series. Instead of throwing a few new twists into each level, there's something new and strange to figure out on every other screen. Mega Man 9 is more than a tribute—it's its own game, and a worthy addition to the series.

And it may just be the toughest game in the series. Mega Man 9 features all of the bottomless pits, lengthy spans between continue points, twitchy jumping sequences and instant-death, trial-and-error gameplay that has long since been focus-grouped out of modern videogames. Relatively recent titles like Mega Man Zero have been just as tough, but Mega Man 9 specializes in the sort of tricks, traps and difficult-to-replicate feats that lead to controller-shaped dents in drywall. The game isn't impossible by any means—when you continue, you get to keep your bolts (which are used as currency), so even if you're as bad at Mega Man 9 as I am, you can always collect a few hundred bucks, buy a bunch of energy tanks or other items, and use them to cheese your way past the tough parts. It's hardly a satisfying way to play the game, but the only alternative is dying hundreds of times and replaying long, slow stretches of the game as you strive to learn and memorize the tougher levels and boss patterns.

It's been over a decade since anyone made a game like Mega Man 9—and for good reason. But as glad as I am that modern games are less willing to infuriate their players, I must admit that it feels great to play a game like this again. Even the things I hate about Mega Man 9 pack a nostalgic thrill that makes me want to invite over long-lost middle school friends and take turns swapping the controller while eating greasy pizza and discussing the previous night's episode of *MacGyver*. Mega Man 9 may inspire as much aggravation as joy, but $10 is a small price to pay to get long-dormant neural synapses firing again.

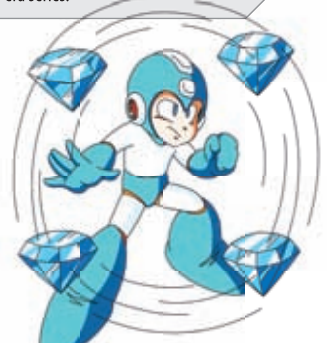


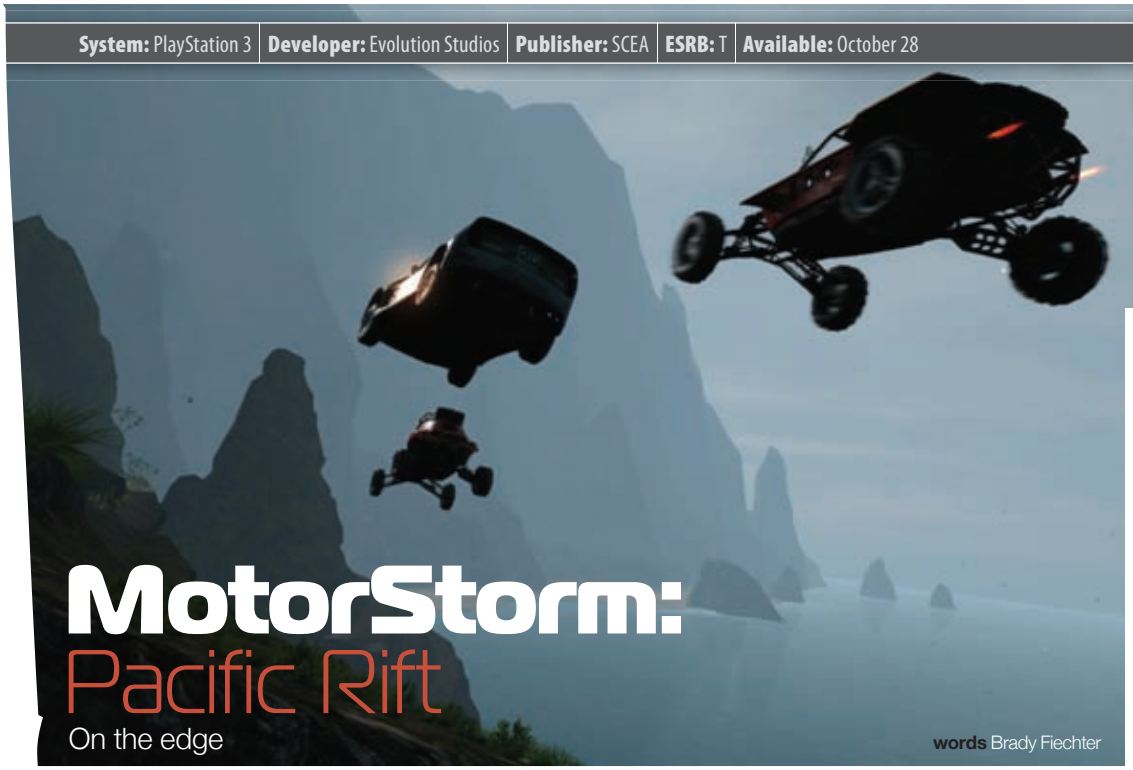


parting shot

Those without well-honed Mega Man skills and a healthy dose of nostalgia for the series will likely abandon MM9 after a few infuriating hours. But old-school fans couldn't ask for a more interesting twist on the NES-era series.

Super mega graphics!





MotorStorm: Pacific Rift

On the edge

words Brady Fiechter

A WipEout fan asked me what I thought of MotorStorm: Pacific Rift, if I thought it was better than WipEout HD, which he had just started playing and was about to enthusiastically declare the king of the series. My reply was simple truth: Did you like MotorStorm? Yes? Then this game will be your next ticket to the king of racing.

Much like WipEout HD, MotorStorm: Pacific Rift invites objection if you aren't totally down with its theme and structure. There are "better" racing games out there, but there are none more entertaining for this gamer—the arcade guy looking for aggressive off-road racing in a gorgeous island setting where tracks are incredibly wide open, diverse and filled with one angry turn after another. This game powers on adrenaline, and when the moment is more about the presentation than the precision, that presentation is so well served, you forgive those times when, say, the opponent cheaply and arbitrarily drops in on your ass to ruin an otherwise perfect run.

> "Yes, then this game will be your next ticket to the king of racing."

Yes, the nasty AI that some people hated in MotorStorm isn't necessarily removed as much as redirected, better balancing the game and putting more control in the hands of a skilled player while still rearing its frustrating head at times. The game can challenge, but in ways that I really appreciated the more I climbed in class: Sometimes the right vehicle really does make a difference—I'm not a fan of that slippery rally car, yet I like that I had to come to grips with its inclusion—and you have to broadly dissect the complexities of the branching track structure to get past some of the moments a more hardcore racer would find off-putting.

Pacific Rift entertains in some unexpected ways. Playing boldly off its Pacific island setting, the game draws upon the environment to visually impact the racing, using blinding sunbursts and volcanic ash intrusions and pockets of jungle growth to toy with your line of sight. Some of the generous 16 tracks look better than others, but when Pacific Rift is at its best, the mood and adrenaline and design sensibilities are hugely appealing. Grab a zippy buggy, go into first-person, blast that turbo down a vertiginous cliff drop hanging over the ocean—the sensation of gaming intoxication is in full effect.

Credit goes to the choice of music, too. For the most part you're bombarded with guitar-fueled rock, but the spectrum of style and artists deserves a shout-out. I've been waiting to tear down a sugar factory wall in a monster truck, power-slide around a mud pit and knock an idiot motorcyclist into a trash heap to the tune of Aphex Twin's "Come to Daddy" for quite some time now.

parting shot

MotorStorm: Pacific Rift is a very specific brand of racing, and it delivers on that brand with fantastic visuals, wild track design and open spaces that make this a proper sequel. The grind to pass every challenge lacks full reward, but at that point, just get online and continue the fun.

LEGO Batman: The Videogame

Welcome to Blockham City

"This town does not need an enema. Gotham, as done by Traveller's Tales, may reek of crime and desperation, but it does not suck by any means."

words Greg Orlando

This town does not need an enema. Gotham, as done by Traveller's Tales, may reek of crime and desperation, but it does not suck by any means.

The popular Lego game franchise rolls ever onward, this time powered by DC Comics' venerable hero Batman. While Lego Batman: The Videogame offers no great surprises, it still manages to advance the blockhead cause.

Arkham Asylum, the world's most poorly policed and easily escapable correctional institute, suffers yet another mass breakout. Villains such as The Joker, Riddler, Penguin, Mr. Freeze, Catwoman, Poison Ivy, etc., escape their captivity and seek to cut a pound of flesh from Gotham City. Here, the game presents two scenarios to players, and both are equally fine: Clean up as the heroes, or wreak vengeance as the bad guys. The game offers standard Lego fare: lots of fighting, some platforming, a few well-placed (but easily navigable) puzzles, and an abundance of collection.

The vast charm of the Lego series is not lost here. Environments are filled with all manner of objects to smash, and each one unleashes a series of brightly colored doodads that can then be collected. It seems absurd, but there's a measurable satisfaction in breaking up a series of items and running around madly in an attempt to grab every goodie. This never gets old, either, and may well be more fun than punching the game's ever-present bad guys. Bad guys, for the record, don't spit doodads when busted up.

It seems odd that the developers opted to do away with Batman's utility belt in favor of multiple costumes. Batman and his young sidekick Robin can access different suits during the course of play, and each has a specific ability. Robin can scale metal walls with magnetic boots, Batman can place explosives with a demolitions suit, and so on. The decision for the design choice is understandable; specializing the suits ensures that some portions of the game's levels are blocked off and preserved in the interest of replay value. Ultimately though, the game suffers because, simply put, some of the suits are just god-awful. Batman now needs the aid of a sonic suit to break glass, and red-hot Lego pieces have been added to the lore so our hero can handle them with a special costume.

Lego Batman also continues the series' lamentable tradition of lackluster vehicle-based stages. Here, the powerful Batwing jet is made to play second fiddle to a World War I-style biplane flown by the Scarecrow, and the extended Batboat sequence, with its bomb-dragging mechanic, could have been cut-and-pasted from the Hoth (or the *Millennium Falcon*) scenes in the Lego Star Wars games.

Despite its missteps, Lego Batman is genuinely likable and certainly possessed of enough good stuff to keep players hooked through both its scenarios. And, for the record, playing as Mr. Freeze and having the ability to freeze enemies in a block of ice is one of video gaming's great simple pleasures.

parting shot

Dr. Frederic Wertham, author of the anti-comic-book work *Seduction of the Innocent*, suggested Batman's penchant for adopting small young boys, dressing them up in tights, and going on "adventures" with them was not particularly healthy.

Batman in a Lego world: The charm continues.

Fracture

Every peak has its valley…

words Greg Orlando

The great divide has come to game consoles. LucasArts and Day 1 Studios have split the United States and created a third-person shooter with a gimmick meant to move the earth. Figuratively and literally.

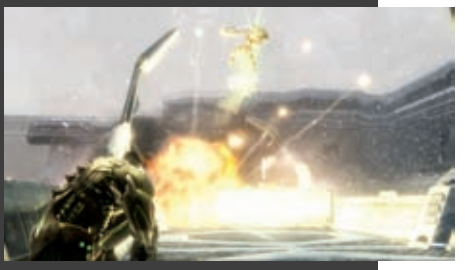
Fracture sets up a civil war fought by the eastern and western halves of the former United States, one embracing cybertechnology, the other employing genetic engineering. In single-player mode, players take the role of Jet Brody, a soldier from the eastern United States-based Atlantic Alliance.

The twist here is that both sides have developed parallel technologies to allow their soldiers to alter the contours of the ground. Grenades can raise or lower terrain to create hills, valleys and chasms. Huge spikes can be summoned up to shift heavy objects or create elevated vantage points, and vortexes flatten terrain and carve out basins while cruelly drawing in nearby soldiers and objects before expelling them violently.

Weapons in the game are tied into this tectonic theme, and the developers here have supplied an arsenal as fine as any ever created. Torpedo guns shoot a burrowing explosive that travels along a linear path and can be detonated at will. A boulder-forming Rhino gun, when properly employed, conjures up images of Lucas' Indiana Jones fleeing in terror from a huge rolling stone. Yet another gun freezes the terrain and anyone foolish enough to be standing on it.

It's a gimmick, yes, and Fracture cracks its cylinders running full-steam on it from the game's beginning to the cacophonous end. Yet it works, mostly because of the sheer carnage and chaos the deformation allows. With the destruction also comes a good bit of potential for strategy, should players elect to take that route. Cleverly manipulating the ground pays big dividends, regardless of whether the tactics are basic (using hills as shields) or more advanced (manipulating the ground to form an extended valley and then wrecking multiple enemies with a Rhino boulder).

"Its smart weaponry creates a lot of stupid fun."



Fracture as a single-player run-and-gun adventure may merely evoke yawns. Fracture as an earth mover, however, has enough juice for two games. Its smart weaponry creates a lot of stupid fun.

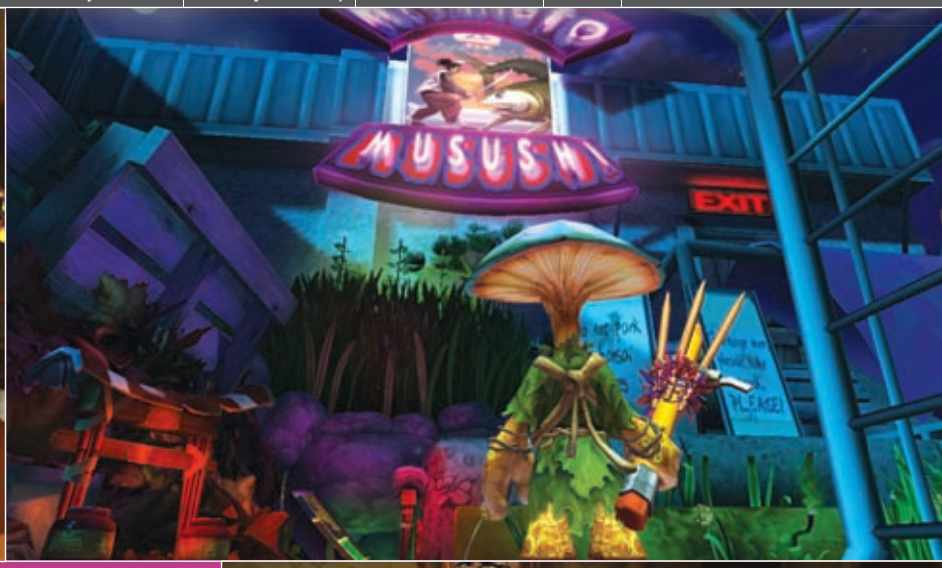
In multiplayer, the game's chaotic nature is amplified. It's a dizzying experience fraught with rapid-fire explosions, chaotic bullet- and fragment blurs, and endless opportunities for players to wonder what the hell it was that killed them this time. Here, the game offers standard fare such as death matches (made ever more life-threatening by the weapon set) and exotic contests requiring players to remain inside a moving circle (again, a spectacularly fatal prospect) in order to score points.

It is, simply, the game equivalent of moving on up. And simultaneously, knocking it down to the ground.

parting shot

Play has abandoned scores, but this one measures an eight on the Richter magnitude scale.

System: Wii | **Developer:** Red Fly | **Publisher:** Gamecock | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** November 11



Mushroom Men
The Spore Wars

Didn't Rush write a song about this?

words Dave Halverson

Residual space dust from a meteorite strike has given a parcel of earth's inert plant and fungal life the power to walk, talk, and think…and what do beings that walk, talk, and think do? They go to war. Morels and Boletes—like our friend Pax here, a scout from the Bolete mushroom tribe—have developed into peaceful utopian creatures, but the poisonous Amanitas and Lepiotas have become hostile and warmongering. Welcome to the The Spore Wars.

A world of living fungi peppered with mutated pests is a great concept, but only in the right hands. It could easily read too gimmicky or cute, like a Toy Story spin-off or other such cliché kiddie fare. But that's not where Red Fly took it. They went down the only path, in my opinion, that could make this game work: the dark path. Not dark as in evil but dark as in foreboding. When you go up against the Amanitas and Lepiotas in Mushroom Men you will genuinely fear for Pax's life. Mushroom Men has sense of wonder too along with just a splash of humor, but it's a far cry from the toddler-vision we're used to whenever critters come to life.

The world Red Fly have created for Mushroom Men is a huge part of this game's draw, cobbled together out of cans, pizza boxes, gas lamps, pieces of toys and appliances, various containers, utensils…if it's small and people dispose of it, it's down here serving a purpose. It's not so much what they use though, as much as how they use it. They've built one the most creative and ingenious game worlds I've had the pleasure of traversing out of junk and debris, which we get to see from Pax's point of view. And when you're not negotiating the Mushroom world, you'll be guiding Pax through ours where a tractor or motorcycle is a giant apparatus and a shed can provide hours of fun.

What sets Pax apart from the other Boletes (else he'd be on a pizza) is the ability to absorb life-giving meteorite chunks; a condition he didn't know he had until he met the Bolete Shaman. Meteor chunks are what build Pax's strength, but they are also sacred to each village. When Pax absorbs the first one he comes in contact with his initial goal is only to get the village another, but when he keeps on absorbing them the rabbit hole gets deeper. Scavenging for weapons by finding and combining various do-dads, Pax's arsenal is constantly growing, used to fend off moles, spiders, field mice, rabbits, possums and other such mutated pests. Combat is a big part of the Mushroom Men aesthetic and it's handled well, but the platforming and adventuring is what really makes it special. Pax emerges form the game's first mission armed with his first Spore Power, Sporekinesis, giving the ability to manipulate and throw large objects with his mind; and the Sticky Hand, which gives him the ability to target and fire a gooey zip line for reaching high places. Together with his Cap-glide Pax is able to go where no mushroom has gone before as he makes his way through Red Fly's imaginative network of clever action-puzzles and set pieces, which are anything and everything except ordinary. This is a fascinating world that really transports the player, provided you're the type who thinks converting the back of a sushi restaurant into a miniature kung-fu set to do battle against marauding Samurai Shiitake is cool. The first half of The Spore Wars is excellent but life beyond the Morel Monastery (the level before the Sushi Restaurant) is like a Prog opus played out in a videogame. Mushroom Men never stops building to its conclusion. Where a lot of games level out and stay awhile, Pax is always on the move; always discovering, making friends, figuring things out, building weapons (and more!), battling nastier and nastier foes, and if you're so inclined, looking for collectibles. Most of all, though, he's entertaining you, because Red Fly know it's your $49.99 that makes their world go-round.

parting shot

Mushroom Men isn't HD or coated with bump mapping (but oh how I wish it was), but what it lacks in "next-gen" sheen it way more than makes up for in design and gameplay. Plus, as Wii games go, it's easily among the top-5 best-looking games out there. For anyone who isn't using their Wii to burn calories or play Wii-ble sports this is what we like to call a no-brainer.

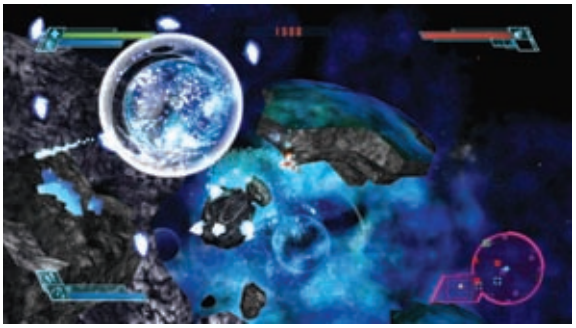
System: Xbox Live Arcade | **Dev:** CrunchTime Games Inc. | **Pub:** CrunchTime Games Inc. | **ESRB:** E | **Avail:** Now

Shred Neblua

I totally shredded the nebula, dude!

In a sea of twin-stick shooters, Shred Nebula is a nice breath of fresh air. I was initially drawn to it under the promise of an engrossing space adventure—the search for the "Lost Expedition," a fleet of intergalactic vessels that mysteriously disappeared years ago—and while the "adventure" portion of that promise didn't quite live up to my expectations, the "space" part sure did. Piloting the game's main ship, the RIP Rocket, is a pure joy (no matter what others may have you believe), and though unlimited continues make things a tad easy for those not concerned with high scores, those who do want to compete on the game's leaderboards will find a truly challenging game ripe with point-earning possibilities in either the Arcade of Score Attack modes.

By far the biggest surprise of Shred Nebula, however, was its multiplayer. The work put into this segment of the game was honestly surprising; from a selection of ten ships that each have an immense amount of depth and balance to them, to the game's shield system that goes so far as to include ideas like parries and whiffs, this is less a bonus mode tossed in for added value and more a full-blown fighting game based around spacecraft. **Eric L. Patterson**



"Piloting the game's main ship, the RIP Rocket, is a pure joy."

parting shot

Though I wish Shred Nebula's adventure aspect had been beefier, the game presents a rather decent single player experience and a very enjoyable multiplayer one.

System: Wii | **Developer:** Nintendo | **Publisher:** Nintendo | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Now

Wii Music

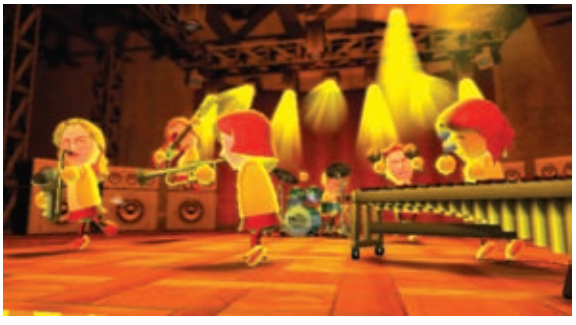
Making the band

"Among other things, I was impressed here with the Drum Lesson."

The versatility of the Wii's innovative interface is on full display in Nintendo's Wii Music, a game that is part jam session and part music instruction. Your Wii Remote and Nunchuck (and even Balance Board if you've got one) provide many different ways to make music across the game's various modes. You can hold the devices and perform as if they were a guitar, violin, drums, horns or even keyboards and more.

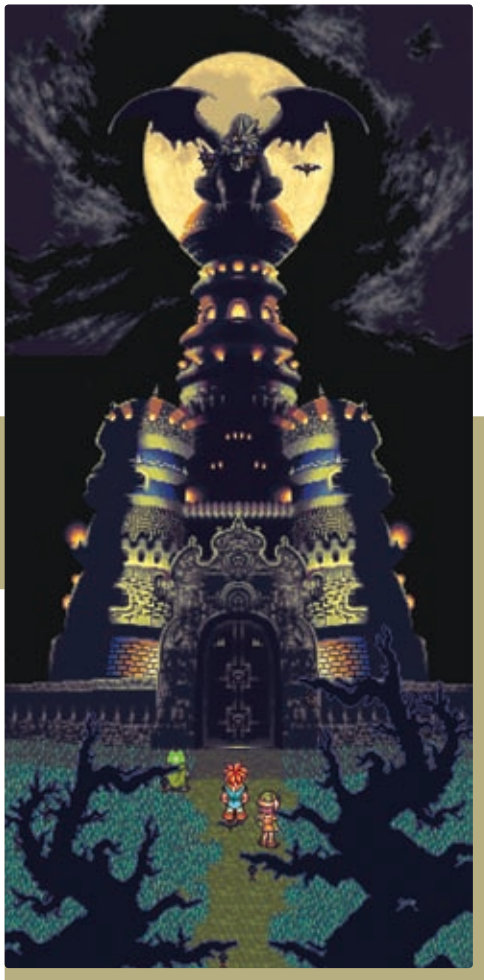
This isn't a game designed to appeal to the rocker in all of us, even though it does offer some of that. Rather, this is a game that tries to explore the idea of expression in music and to give the user a basic understanding of rhythm and song structure. In Jam Session, up to four players can choose their own instruments and play their parts in one of the game's many songs. The fun part is that you can follow along with on-screen prompts to play the song normally but also improvise your own timing and add notes and flourishes.

There is also the very interesting Lesson Mode which aims to teach us about how different styles of music are made. Among other things, I was impressed here with the Drum Lesson. Using a Balance Board, you can get a pretty sophisticated drum session going. I also enjoyed the Mii Maestro mode in which you get to wave the Wii Remote around in correct time to conduct an orchestra. I wish there were more songs here though. **Mike Hobbs**



parting shot

Wii Music is fun and interesting, and there hasn't been anything quite like it before. It will teach you more about music than Rock Band or Guitar Hero and it's a blast expressing yourself through the Wii's brilliant interface which can easily morph into many different types of instruments.



Chrono Trigger

Masterpiece

System: Nintendo DS | **Developer:** Square Enix | **Publisher:** Square Enix | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Now

So, this game is a masterpiece. One of the most charming pieces of game-entertainment developed in the last fifteen years. Nearly sacred. The plot moves forward relentlessly, propelling each set-piece into the next by baiting your curiosity (and rewarding your exploration). We're not talking about an advanced, shifting AI, nor does the game mold itself to your play-style; what we're dealing with is just a very soundly structured script. The setting is unique, the characters are all likable stereotypes, and the music is top-notch stuff.

It's a game that should have been released on day one with the GBA, or the DS.

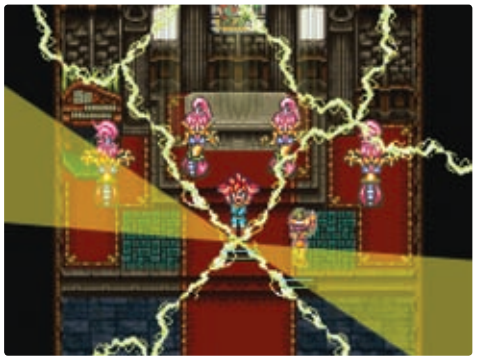
And as much as you thought you liked Chrono Trigger, playing it again will remind you how much you actually liked it. You really liked Chrono Trigger. And if you haven't played it before, you're going to really like Chrono Trigger.

Telling a sweeping, millenia-spanning story of heroism and fate, Chrono Trigger's ideas have been used by other games in the years following its original release. The branching paths and multiple endings have been a feature of RPGs for a long while, but the restraint that streamlines the game's central tale has rarely been duplicated.

Chrono Trigger works because of that script. It works because of the glee of each monster encounter; a tiny pantomime that gives a little heart to every battle. Enemies don't just appear and clutter the screen; sometimes they jump out from behind bushes, sometimes they knock into each other and dart off without ever attacking you again. Everyone who worked on Chrono Trigger loved it, and it shows in each minute. There's no filler in this game, and no cut corners.

But what has the DS added to the title? Well, I may just be imagining it, but I swear that the slight delay after battles (while the DS brings up the touch screen menus again) is new ... but it's so forgivable that you don't really notice after a while. The game blissfully retains a SNES mode, so you can do away with the tertiary touch-screen control—and, well, I'd suggest it, since it adds so little to the experience. We've got a new translation of the script which, frankly, I didn't even catch. The animated cutscenes are brilliant, despite my personal dislike of Akira Toriyama's designs. The music remains wonderfully orchestrated. For emphasis, let me include another sentence about the music: It's amazing.

> "Everyone who worked on Chrono Trigger loved it, and it shows in every minute."



And there's that dungeon, which works quite nicely.

Also there's a monster-battle mode.

Regrettably, there's no way for me to test out the wireless battle mode, as Play only received one copy of the game ... and since no one else has it yet, I have to admit I can't review it. Point is, the game doesn't need it—it's already so good—that as long as the VS mode doesn't break the single-player campaign, then it's just gravy. I can't wait to try out the retail copy against a friend. But even if it the VS stuff sucked, this game is still Chrono Trigger. It's gorgeous. **Heather Campbell**

parting shot

The game I've been waiting to play again. Chrono Trigger is a shining example of classic video-game concepts harmonizing into an unforgettable melody.

Time has been good to this RPG gem.

System: PSP | **Developer:** tri-Ace | **Publisher:** Square Enix | **ESRB:** Teen | **Available:** October 21 | review

Star Ocean: First Departure

A snug fit on the PSP

The PSP is home to dozens of RPG remakes, but no developer has ever attempted one quite like Star Ocean: First Departure. Visually, the overhaul is as drastic as they come, transforming a hand-drawn 2-D game into one with pre-rendered CG areas linked by a new 3-D overworld map. Several excellent animated scenes have been added, and the music—one of Motoi Sakuraba's better scores—has been completely rearranged. The disparate styles seem cobbled together at times, but most of the individual elements look great.

Outside of the graphics and music, however, almost nothing has changed. The battles look 3-D but play 2-D, with characters that can only attack to the left and right. Plot holes caused by the game's original rushed release remain unfilled, and no changes have been made to smooth out the game's choppy difficulty curve. First Departure may not look anything like the Star Ocean of 1996, but it feels astonishingly faithful to its source material, for better and for worse.

The better comes from the cheesy but fun story line, in which a trio of typical fantasy-RPG heroes must team up with a pair of earthlings from a Star Trek-inspired future. The individual quests are all generic RPG staples, but the clash of cultures and the endearing characters—all of whom are well voice-acted in English—breathe new life into old clichés. The game's deep skill system was also a highlight, and remains one of the series' most popular features.

The main flaw can be found in the game's overly simplistic battle system, which can support few strategies more advanced than rushing in, mashing the attack button or—in the case of bosses—mashing a special-attack button. It's a mystery why the developers would spend so much effort updating the graphics to Star Ocean 2 standards while not doing the same for the battles. The game's quest is also poorly paced, with some dull backtracking parts and lengthy stretches that substitute fetch quests for story development.

Star Ocean was the first game from a small but ambitious developer that had a lot of good ideas, but nowhere near enough time to fully develop them. This new face-lift may hide the wrinkles, but it can't conceal the game's age and origins. **Casey Loe**

parting shot

The effort put into remaking Star Ocean only went skin-deep, but when you factor in the quality of the PSP's library, it's still one of the best RPGs on the platform.

System: Nintendo DS | **Developer:** BioWare | **Publisher:** Sega | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Out Now | review

Sonic Chronicles

BioWare tap into the kid market

I'll say one thing about Sonic Chronicles: it's an extremely well made game, and for an RPG based on humanoid Rodentia ranging from naked echidna (except for the shoes) to a pink hedgehog in a red dress, it's extremely well read. This is what BioWare does. KFC does chicken right, they make action RPGs right. But whether or not they were the right choice for this action-RPG in particular—which I believe they were—I think depends on who shows up to buy it between Sonic's Genesis era fans or his Saturday morning cartoon fans. BioWare and Sega are betting on the kid crowd and in this particular case, I'd have to agree. Of the millions of teen to adult gamers who own DSs, how many would choose a Sonic RPG when the choices are so vast? I hope a lot of parents find their way to Chronicles because it's among the best youth focused DS games out there. BioWare have essentially taken the award-winning formula from KOTOR (Star Wars—ick!) and Mass Effect (bliss) and married it to the Sonic mystique at a 7-10 (max) year old level. The conversation/response tabs will seem silly to anyone older but younger kids will surely get a kick out of playing it snarky with Amy or antagonizing the sassy Rouge. Character management and menus are almost entirely icon driven and the combat screen couldn't be any easier to assimilate. The combat can be tricky though, but nothing too severe. Regular attacks are as simple as tapping your selection, but POW attacks require a series of stylus timing and tracing patterns in order to connect. Enemies can also run (best part if you ask me), triggering a side-scrolling scramble where you have to tap Sonic (and often a friend) to avoid obstacles and hit speed pads to catch 'em before they get away. The only area Chronicles really suffers in is the music. I don't know what happened but it's back to blips and bleeps. Not catchy Sonic blips and bleeps; that would be fine, it's just altogether hollow. I'm not crazy about the overworld map either, although it's beautifully hand-drawn and highly detailed. That's exactly why I wish I could freely navigate it with the D-pad. The tap-and-go system just seems so un-Sonic. I thoroughly believe that Sonic is not a kids brand. No Japan bred Mega-Drive/Genesis era action hero could ever lose that much of its core demo. But I also believe that BioWare has made the best kid version possible. **Dave Halverson**

parting shot

Sonic fans won't dig the (young) kid friendly theme tap-and-go gameplay, but BioWare hit the kid bull's-eye. Hope it works.

"...KFC does chicken right, they make action-RPGs right."

review | System: DS | Developer: Konami | Publisher: Konami | ESRB: Teen | Available: Now

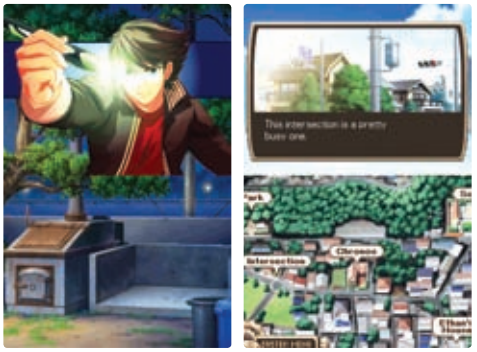
Time Hollow

A reversal of fortune

Creativity and writing talent may be in short supply in Japanese RPGs, but they aren't hard to find in the digital-comic genre. Cheap and easy to make, games like Phoenix Wright and Hotel Dusk give a single writer free reign to tell a story without having to pander to focus groups. Time Hollow may be one of the simplest, lowest-tech games to come out of Konami in years, but in many ways, it's one of the most interesting.

Time Hollow tells the story of a boy named Ethan who acquires the power to draw a hole between the present and the past and reach through it to make tiny changes—snipping a wire, yanking out a set of keys or returning someone's glasses. But changing the past tends to have unintended consequences, especially when someone with a similar power seems to be tinkering with Ethan's own history. Time Hollow's tale is an involved one, with a few novel twists on time travel that I've never seen explored before. The writing is far from perfect and it veers off in some unsatisfying directions toward the end, but the story can provoke some powerful reaction—there's a long stretch before the climax where I found my heart sinking every time the hero's cell phone would ring, dreading to hear the bad news on the other end.

A good story is pretty much all that Time Hollow has to offer. The time-altering parts don't really work as puzzles, because there's only one solution and the game won't let you attempt that solution until it's piled on the hints. But at least the game moves you from one event to another at a fast pace. Unlike Phoenix Wright, you don't have to waste time examining every pixel on the screen and reinterviewing people time and time again. There are usually only one or two things to click on in each room, and when you're done, the game makes it clear that it's time to move on.



"Time Hollow certainly isn't for everyone."

Time Hollow certainly isn't for everyone. Outside of some excellent animated bits and the handful of parts where you get to draw the time portals, it feels much more like a book or a comic than a game. But if you're looking for an involving, fast-paced read on your Nintendo DS, you won't do much better than this. **Casey Loe**

parting shot

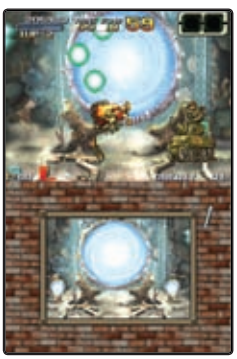
More a comic than a game, Time Hollow is just interactive enough to draw you deeper into its strange but engrossing story.

review | System: Nintendo DS | Developer: SNK Playmore | Publisher: Ignition Ent. | ESRB: T | Available: Nov. 18

Metal Slug 7

Smaller, Badder, Better

You rarely see the number 7 on the tail end of any brand name in any walk of entertainment (although Sly Stallone is giving it his best shot), but Metal Slug has been keeping it hand-drawn 2-D-real since this tiny sliver of a DS cart would have set you set you back a cool 300-400 bucks and come in a case the size of a Wii. Metal Slug 7 can't stand pixel to pixel with 200 Mega+ Neo-Geo slabs like Slugs 1-3, but that doesn't make seeing a handheld screen stuffed with blazing pyrotechnics, rumbling steel war machines, and wave after wave of over-zealous grunts spurting blood and dying in agony any less gratifying. The big deal about Metal Slug 7, though, is that it's the series' DS debut (took them long enough) built from the ground up for the handheld market. It's also the first game in the series that didn't begin life in the arcade. Six (from Metal Slug 6) series alumni are yours for the running and gunning: Marco, Eri, Tarma, Fio, Ralf and Clark, along with their usual level of give and take depending on the difficulty setting. A greenhorn can jump in on beginner mode using Fio (her default weapon is the Big Heavy Machine Gun with a 50% weapon supply increase: little girl, big-ass gun) and rock General Morden's army like a hurricane, and leave normal and hard to the psychos. Sadly there are no new characters to report (MS needs another heroine!), which is strange for a debut with a 7 in the title, although there are three new vehicles on hand to grind the opposition into bone meal: the Slug Truck, Heavy Armor, and Slug Gigant, a giant robot with serious firepower (easily the best of the three). Slug 7 also has a cool POW list feature that shows you the percentage of POW clones you've rescued in each level (why are hippies with weapons running around in a war zone anyway?) The Combat School is the best though. The cute, blonde drill instructor loves to chit-chat (flirt) and the option to dive into boss battles (crazy stuff on DS), base assaults, etc. for micro MS sessions, is the ultimate pause that refreshes. **Dave Halverson**



parting shot

Not quite a silky smooth as arcade Slugs but, er, it's a DS. Metal Slug 7 is a raging run 'n gun, tailor made for life on the go. No branching and the odd flat background are slight dings, but you'll live.

System: PSP | **Developer:** Pentavision | **Publisher:** PM Studios | **Available:** November 2008 | preview

DJ Max Fever

Hey Mr. DJ

Say hello to one of the PSP's best hidden gems: DJ Max Portable, the rhythm game series from Korean developer Pentavision that combines the gameplay style of Beatmania with the audio and visual charm of Pump It Up to create what has long been a top title in the import PSP scene.

Much to my surprise (and delight), the series will soon be available to PSP owners all across North America as publisher PM Studios is set to bring the series to us as DJ Max Fever. For anybody worried about what localization could mean for a game like DJ Max, fear not: in putting together this new customized release for the U.S. market, tossing out the original Korean music for a questionable "Westernized" soundtrack won't be the plan of action. Instead, Fever's 60 or so tracks will be a selection of choices from the first two Portable games, along with a few additions PM Studios is putting together exclusively for Fever with Korean Hip Hop artist Hyun Do Lee.

If you're a fan of rhythm games, or just a PSP owner looking for something new and different to feed your system, then you should absolutely keep one eye locked firmly on DJ Max Fever. You can be assured that I'll be doing so, and with luck, I'll be back next issue with a full review. **Eric L. Patterson**

"Say hello to one of the PSP's best hidden gems."

System: Nintendo DS | **Developer:** Bird Studio/Mistwalker/AQI | **Publisher:** Ignition Ent. | **ESRB:** E | **Available:** Feb. 09 | preview

Blue Dragon Plus

Shadow Dancers

Blue Dragon Plus gets underway in a manner befitting the latest RPG juggernaut from Mistwalker, with a high-quality shot of dual screen FMV, and it only gets better from there, especially if you're looking for some real-time action in your tactical role playing regimen.

A year has passed since Shu, Zola, Kluke and Marumaro defeated the evil (and extremely unattractive) Nene saving the world and cracking open the planet in the process. Their respite comes to an abrupt end however, when the Shadow of a Balaur—an enormous, vicious three-headed dragon—emerges from the myriad of cubes that exploded from the planets core, hence the root of Blue Dragon Plus' evil. As Shu, Zola, Marumaro, and Szabo move in to investigate, the battle lines are drawn when a team of Mech Robots move in. The battles in Blue Dragon Plus offer a refreshing change of pace. Since the members of Shu's party can move freely around the battlefield by tapping the character and then destination, exploiting each character's strength as they relate to the battle conditions becomes a real-time endeavor. You might use Zola's speed by having her open all of the treasure chests and forage for medicine while the well-rounded Shu holds off 2 or 3 Mechs, and the small but powerful Marumaro goes for the jugular. Sounds easy enough but considering you can amass an army of up to 16 humans and Mecha, that's some heavy multi-tasking between healing, deployment and of course setting off all those lovely Shadows.

review | System: DS | Developer: Vogster Ent. | Publisher: Tecmo | ESRB: E | Available: October 28

Robocalypse

Rockem sockem robots of the future

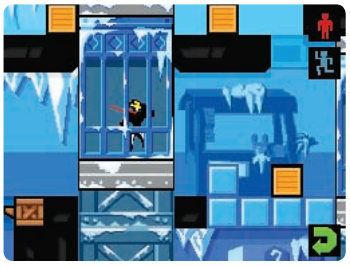
I can't say I fully understand who Robocalypse is targeted at. The game takes the concept of real-time strategy games, simplifies the overall gameplay elements, populates itself with a cast of cartoon characters, and then infuses the entire game with a great sense of humor and silliness. So, casual players? Initially I'd say yes, but the overall difficulty of the missions (even on easy) makes me think those who aren't RTS pros may find themselves often overwhelmed.

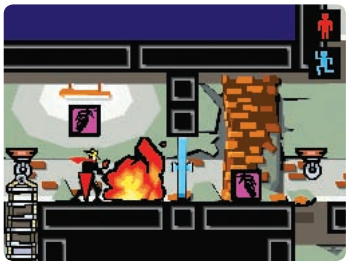
Long-time strategy fans then? That previously-mentioned simpler gameplay—where you only have direct control over a few "Hero" units, and have to manage the rest of your army via a waypoint system—is likely to drive the serious strategy folks insane. Without fail, you'll be in the middle of battle in desperate need of support, and those grunts that you can't directly control will just be wandering aimlessly no matter how many commands you try issuing. **Eric L. Patterson**

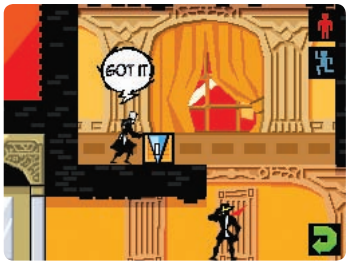
review | System: DS | Developer: Taito | Publisher: Taito | ESRB: E | Available: October 7

Exit DS

The Great Esc







I always meant to play Exit; it seemed like a unique action puzzler that not only had an interesting concept (the adventures of escapologist Mr. Esc) but also a wonderfully appealing comic-esque visual style.

And yet, not until Exit DS would I finally get around to giving the game a go. To be honest, I'm kind of glad I waited, as the DS-specific additions the game has received seem like things I'd really rather not live without. Having the top screen dedicated to an ever-present map is especially helpful, as the Exit's puzzles deal with a lot of back-and-forth across the various stages as you juggle items, switches, and survivors.

Then, well, there's the control. I originally tried using the standard control scheme, and found it to be a frustrating challenge in itself (which isn't a good thing). While switching to fully stylus-based gameplay has its own set of quirks, the overall flow of the game is far more enjoyable as different actions are often automatically chained together instead of having to be manually done one at a time. **Eric L. Patterson**

review | System: DS | Developer: Vogster Ent. | Publisher: Tecmo | ESRB: E | Available: October 28

The Legend of Kage 2

The legend returns

If there's a downside to the immense popularity the DS has achieved, it is the temptation many companies must find themselves under to resurrect any gaming franchise that they can in the hopes of making a quick buck or two. Thus, I was somewhat skeptical over the idea of The Legend of Kage 2. A sequel 20+ years later to a game that, while I owned and enjoyed, was at best probably a niche title? Truly, the makings of a total cash-in.

Boy was I ever wrong. Kage 2 is a game I loved from beginning to end, an homage to an era of classic side-scrolling ninja escapades gone by, and a reminder of my time spent with titles like Ninja Gaiden on the NES or Ninja Spirits on the Turbo-16. Kage 2 isn't all old-school, however, providing two characters (Kage and Chihiro) that grow in depth and enjoyment as the story progresses, wonderfully detailed character sprites, and a ridiculously gorgeous soundtrack. Toss in a few sly nods to the original Legend of Kage for good measure, and you've got an adventure that anybody with an appreciation for old-school action most definitely should check out. **Eric L. Patterson**

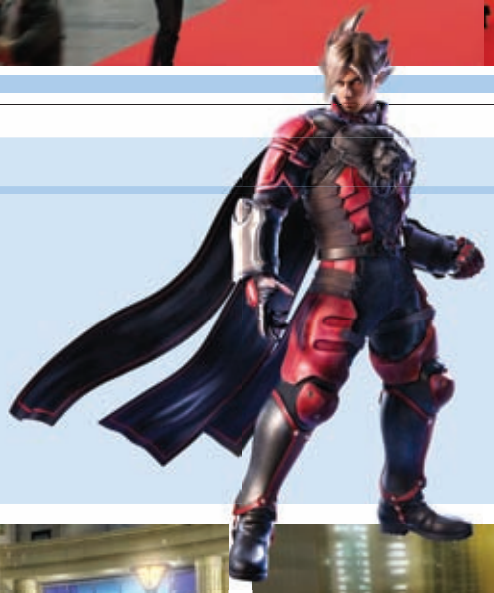
THE SECOND ARCADE RENAISSANCE: **AM SHOW 2008**

words Nick Des Barres / Dai Kohama

If the AOU Show earlier this year didn't make the message clear enough, arcades are back in Japan. AOU may have been all about the rejuvenation of the fighting game, but the September AM ("Amusement Machine") Show in Tokyo brought a slew of new uprights in a wide range of genres. Sega and Namco showed so many racing and gun games you'd swear you were living in 1998, while the myriad fringe 2-D shooters on the sidelines protested strongly against the supposed death of that genre. Other types of games may have outnumbered fighters, but there were plenty of those, too; the playable debut of The King of Fighters XII and Tekken 6 Bloodline Revolution were the most prominent.

Namco Bandai

The traditional "big two" at any Japanese arcade event are Namco Bandai and Sega; this year was no exception. Namco's biggest announcement at AM Show was Tekken 6 Bloodline Rebellion, an upgrade to last year's Tekken 6 that adds two new characters (Alisa Bosconovitch and Lars Alexandersson), tons of new items and stages, and an expanded customization mode. Also making their debut were motorcycle sim Nirin, PS3 arcade board-based machine gun shooter Razing Storm, and updates to popular series in the form of Wangan Midnight Maximum Tune 3 DX, Gundam VS. Gundam NEXT, and Taiko Drum Master 12.



Tekken 6 Bloodline Rebellion

Taiko Drum Master 12

Wangan MMT 3 DX

Razing Storm

Namco Bandai (cont.)

Nirin

Gundam VS. Gundam NEXT

SNK Playmore

SNK Playmore had only one game at AM Show, but it was enough. The long, long-awaited King of Fighters XII finally made its playable debut, with 14 of an eventual 20 total playable characters selectable. Running in 720p with 100% hand-drawn graphics (even Arc System Works' BlazBlue can't claim that), KoFXII was stunning to behold. The new game systems appear to be inspired by Street Fighter IV's Focus Attack, primarily centered around ground games and mixups. KoFXII will be in arcades next Spring.

King of Fighters XII

Goods

Japanese arcade shows also feature the season's lineup of prizes that can be fished out of UFO Catchers. How badly do you want this Japan-exclusive Little Big Planet merch?

Capcom

Capcom has only just released the transcendentally awesome Street Fighter IV, so perhaps one can't complain that their only game at AM Show was Tatsunoko VS. Capcom. Recently announced for simultaneous Wii and arcade release in December, TVC pits Capcom fighters against storied Tatsunoko anime heroes of olde.

Tatsunoko VS. Capcom

Taito

Although Square-Enix-owned Taito continues to act as the arcade industry's secret string-puller (virtually all major arcade games now run on their Taito TypeX board), the company had a few groovy offerings of their own. Space Invaders: The Beat Attacker fused pellet firing with Dance Dance Revolution, shooter Trouble Witchies represents just the latest fan-made game to break into arcades, and developer G.rev was showing the brilliant-looking Senko no Ronde Duo, sequel to the versus shooter released in the West as WarTech.

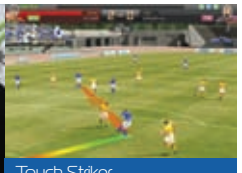
Trouble Witchies

Space Invaders: The Beat Attacker

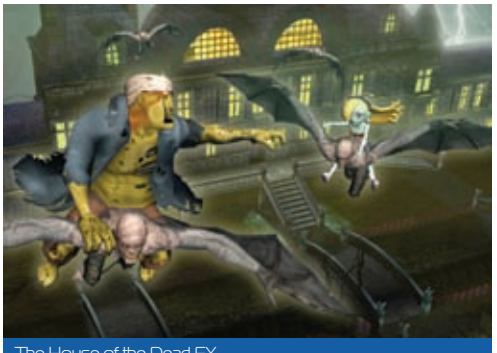
Sega

Despite an almost equally strong showing by Namco Bandai, we think Sega owned the show. How can you argue with a lineup like Sega Rally 3, new licensed racers Hummer and Harley-Davidson: King of the Road, gun shooters Rambo and The House of the Dead EX, and the funky touchscreen-based Touch Striker? Oh, that's right, you can't.

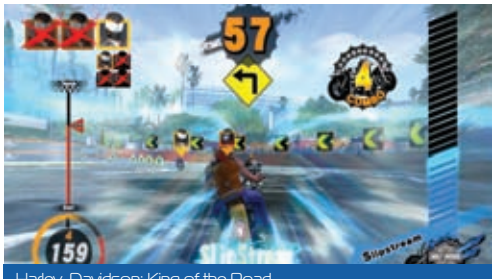
Sega Rally 3



Touch Striker



The House of the Dead EX



Harley-Davidson: King of the Road

Examu

Relatively new publisher Examu, founded by ex-SNK developers, is rapidly making a name for itself with their solid 2-D fighters. On display at the show were Suggoi! Arcana Heart 2, an update to last year's all-girl Arcana Heart 2 with two new characters, and Daemon Bride, a unique-looking goth pretty boy fighting game (think Ayami Kojima's Castlevania art).

Suggoi! Arcana Heart 2

Daemon Bride

Rambo

Hummer

System: NDS | **Developer:** Sonic Team | **Publisher:** Sega | **Available:** Q4 Japan, Date TBA U.S.

Phantasy Star Zero

Sega slashes the O in 'PSO' for an all-new online adventure.

words Casey Loe

A new version of an 8-year old game doesn't sound so exciting, until you consider that the original Dreamcast version of Phantasy Star Online still holds the crown as the best online action-RPG ever made on a console. Not that it's had a lot of competition—Sega decided to make weird card games (PSO Episode III) and cash-grubbing whorefests (Phantasy Star Universe) instead of a proper sequel, while the few other companies who attempted the genre either decided that two players would be plenty (Too Human) or that the internet was a fad that could be safely ignored (Monster Hunter Portable). Which brings us to Phantasy Star Zero, a DS game that has the look, feel, and scope of a Dreamcast game—and is still somehow the *state of the goddamn art* of the online ARPG genre.

It isn't clear if Phantasy Star Zero is a sequel or prequel to the original PSO, but the title and the frontier-style character designs suggest that it might tell the tale of the original, ill-fated Ragol pioneers (such as the legendary Red Ring Rico) whose records were discovered in Phantasy Star Online. If that prospect draws a big "who cares" from you, we'd certainly understand—storylines to online Phantasy Star games tend to fall somewhere between thin (PSO) and awful (PSU). Sega hasn't revealed the single-player story mode of Phantasy Star Zero yet, but there is reason to hope that they've learned from their mistakes, since they've hired professional mystery novelist and confessed PSO addict Teru Arai to script the tale.

But Sega has by no means shifted their focus away from multiplayer, and are allowing four-player parties to team up over either local wireless or Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection. They've abandoned all pretense of language filters and symbol chats, and will allow players to communicate freely by writing or drawing their messages on the DS touch screen, which will then appear as word

bubbles above their characters. This will finally allow the sort of free communication that is lacking in nearly all other online handheld games, and we're thrilled to see Sega finally throw up their hands and say "you know what? I don't even care anymore if they draw dildos and shout out racial slurs. They paid for the damn game."

Everything else we know about the game suggests a near-perfect recreation of PSO. You have vast, randomized areas you access from a hub town, an action palette (now on the touch screen) that determines what each button does, and 14 classes that reflect the various intersections between the Human, Newman, and Android races, and the Hunter, Ranger, and Force jobs. The classes have all been dramatically redesigned by Lunar character designer Toshiyuki Kuboka, with the skintight bodysuits and neon-tube lasers giving way to cloaks, bandanas, and revolver-inspired handguns. All of the areas seem to be entirely new, with a rustic hub town, desert canyon, snowy forest, and bayou revealed so far.

> "Sega has by no means shifted their focus away from multiplayer, and are allowing four-player parties to team up over either local wireless or Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection."

Mags have returned, and there seem to be a few new mechanicals twists in the mix, such as jumping attacks and a series of giant claw weapons. The game's logo and introductory movie also strongly imply that you'll be paying a visit to the moon.

Everyone here at Play-Japan has been a degenerate PSO addict at some point in our lives and, frankly, have had our spirits crushed as a half-dozen games billed as the "next PSO" landed with a thud. But it's hard to be skeptical when the only thing that seems to be separating PS0 from the majesty of PSO is the width of the final letter of its abbreviated name. We'll find out if PS0 truly is the second coming when it ships on...wait...Christmas Day?! That's gotta be a good sign.

WARFARE UNRESTRAINED

FARCRY2 + ALIENWARE
BUST FIRST PERSON SHOOTERS WIDE OPEN

No loads, no paths, no maps – Far Cry 2 places you in the middle of a single, twenty square mile tract of brutal and hostile African terrain. The elimination of predefined levels means you have free reign to track down and eliminate your enemies as you see fit. But don't expect the usual canned targets hiding behind corners or springing up from obvious spawning points. The all–new Dunia Engine, designed just for Far Cry 2, delivers dynamic enemy artificial intelligence so you never know when or where to expect enemy resistance.

With over 100 hours of game play across 70 missions, you are in full control. Confront your targets in full frontal assaults or use the cover of darkness and kill them in their sleep, all the while building a reputation for killing that can make later opponents cower at the very sight of you. The expansive world and non–scripted A.I. of Far Cry 2 comes to life on an Alienware computer where multi-core processors and advanced memory options fuel the game engine's intensive real–time elements with zero lag or latency. In Far Cry 2, prepare for the unexpected. With an Alienware computer in your arsenal, your enemies should as well.

FARCRY2

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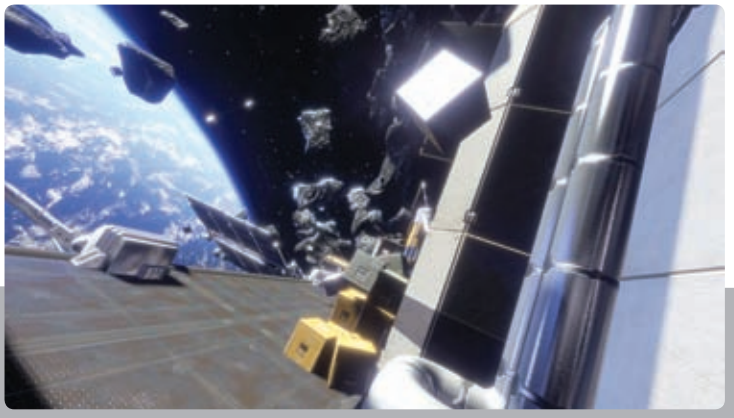
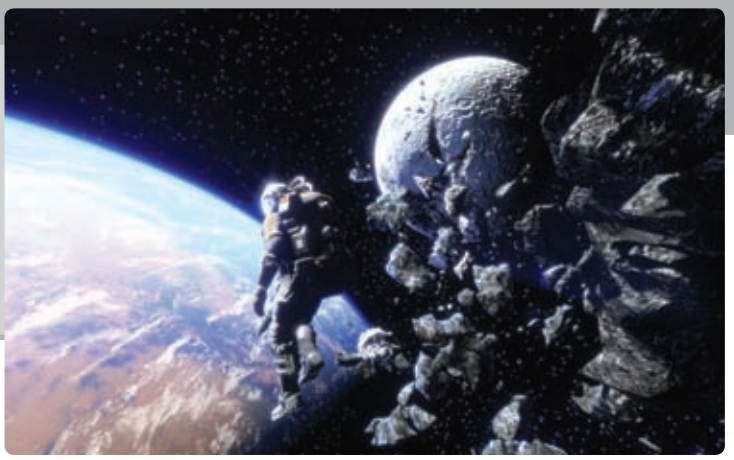
preview | **System:** PC | **Developer:** Futuremark Games Studio | **Publisher:** Futuremark Games Studio | **Multi:** 32p Multi mode, stats | **Available:** 2009





SHATTERED HORIZON

Waging orbital warfare

words Mike Griffin

The space race of the 21st century is moving at a snail's pace, falling behind NASA's hopeful forecasts. We haven't been back to the moon in 36 years, the new shuttle is delayed, and the International Space Station needs an Extreme Home Makeover. It doesn't help that the U.S. economy is buckling with a budget tied to foreign wars, not the expansion of the space program. Witness China's recent first steps into space, perhaps another sign of the declining Western space program. In this weak and unregulated space, how long before giant multinational corporations decide to piggyback emerging programs and establish their own orbital and lunar operations? Such is the premise of Futuremark Games Studio's Shattered Horizon, where 30 years in the future a terrible explosion—the result of careless nuclear exploitation—rocks a massive lunar mining facility, filling the space between the moon and Earth with billions of tons of debris.

Stranded behind the asteroid belt (dubbed the "Arc"), the damaged International Space Station is a much larger vessel in Shattered Horizon's future, hosting astronauts, scientists and military personnel alike. The cataclysmic explosion at the Moon Mining Cooperative facility has left a similar group of isolated survivors on the moon. Each faction has received orders to aggressively defend their positions: ISA astronauts must apprehend the mining company rebels at any cost, while the MMC staff has been ordered to resume nuclear fusion at intact sites and attack any intruders. Shattered Horizon is the first multiplayer-focused installment in a series of first-person action titles based on this battle for the Arc, inspired by freedom of movement in zero-gravity space.

Why did Finland's Futuremark, renowned for its stunning real-time 3-D benchmarking software, decide to enter games development via a multiplayer PC title? "In today's big-budget, console-driven industry, a multiplayer-only PC game is kind of rare," Executive Producer Jukka Mäkinen tells *Play*. "But we see it as a great opportunity to give gamers a very pure multiplayer experience that is designed and optimized right from the start for their PCs. You could ask why we put so much effort into creating the backstory for the game. The reason is that we created a vision that could spawn many games. Shattered Horizon is just the first."

> "The engine allows us to simulate zero gravity by giving all game objects—including the players—mass and other physical properties."
>
> Jukka Mäkinen, Executive Producer
> **Futuremark Games Studio**

This in-engine image shows an MMC (Moon Mining Cooperative) player floating amid the debris now encircling the Earth. The shattered moon hangs in the background while the player stares at an Earth he can no longer return to.

According to Antti Summala, lead designer at Futuremark Games Studio, "Shattered Horizon's focus on multiplayer is actually very liberating. We can concentrate on the things that will have the biggest impact on gameplay, and really make sure that the core mechanics of the game—the zero-gravity combat and complete freedom of movement—are fun and rewarding. We knew it would be very difficult to challenge the biggest FPS games head-on. The tough part was finding a way to do something new in the FPS genre."

Waging warfare isn't a particularly straightforward process when there's no gravity to reel in your infantry. Since zero gravity is a primary force in Shattered Horizon's gameplay, Futuremark is committed to hyperfast, instantly intuitive movement in these conditions. They've combined proven shooter mechanics with extensive research of realistic space technologies, propulsion and ballistics. "Realism for us means no aliens and no space marines. It also means that the weapons and space suits in the game are very much based on existing technology and concepts adapted for use in future space," Antti explains.

With rocket packs, for example, players won't need ramps or ladders to reach high ground and can simply fly across open spaces. While you gain from these dramatic cosmic dashes, you also risk becoming exposed when leaving cover. Giving players complete freedom of movement in a zero-gravity environment of asteroids, wreckage

The Space Suit: Past and Future

You can see Futuremark's realistic design principles at work by comparing a NASA suit from the '80s with the suit worn by ISA (International Space Agency) astronauts in Shattered Horizon. The NASA suit is bulky, cumbersome and awkward. Each is made to order and expensive, difficult to get in and out of, and restrictive to movement. The rocket pack, or Manned Maneuvering Unit, as NASA calls it, is very large and requires the user to manipulate the controls with both hands, making EVA (Extra Vehicular Activity) work difficult.

In the world of Shattered Horizon, commercialization of the moon and near-Earth space has lead to more efficient designs. Suits are produced in much greater numbers from a standard and well-tested design. The new ISA suits offer ample flexibility and movement. They are lighter and thinner, and modern materials offer superior protection from vacuum, radiation and extreme temperatures. The ISA rocket pack is smaller, thrusters more powerful and accurate. It offers voice and finger-tip control built into the suit, freeing up the astronaut's hands for rapid EVA work, like weapons use.

and space installations leads to very unique level designs with tactical possibilities not found in most shooters. Sort of like the go-anywhere movement of Tribes, where structures and cover objects still play a role, but translated to zero gravity.

Driving the desperate ISA vs. MMC conflict are strategic locations across the Arc peppered with rare supplies from Earth that have penetrated the sea of debris. Manmade objects are interspersed with rocky debris to create sub-zones and choke points, and to give players a natural sense of "up" in this weightless environ. Though details regarding modes or campaigns haven't been finalized, Futuremark has demonstrated a control point-style map, with large teams (32 players) holding key objectives to dominate the round.

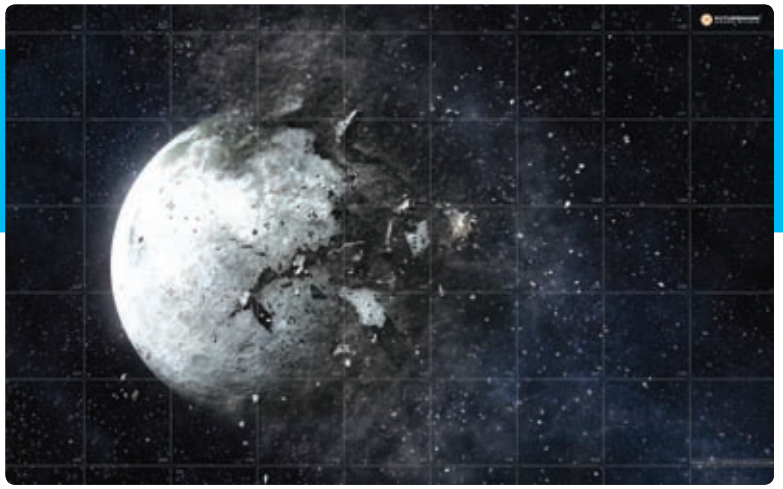
Did you know that any modern gun will fire in space? All the oxygen needed is locked up in the propellant in the shell. The equipment in SH is a great example of striking a balance through existing tech (instead of inventing something far-fetched), including the likes of assault pistols, SMGs, scoped rifles and special grenades that have been adapted to space. Besides its crucial thrusters, the player's space suit protects against extremes of heat and cold and provides minor defense against gunfire. Player health and suit status are independent. Many suit functions will remain intact, but if a suit becomes too bullet-ridden, the vacuum effect of space may compromise life support and pressurization for the fragile human within. Death sometimes has the suit thrusters comically malfunctioning, sending a fragged player spiraling off into the cruel oblivion of space.

Futuremark has a proven track record of stunning 3-D benchmarking suites and it's from that lineage that Shattered Horizon borrows its technology, using a modified version of the 3DMark Vantage engine. This engine was expressly created to test and showcase bleeding-edge video cards and it boasts extremely sophisticated shader routines: "…one of the strongest features of the engine is how it handles light. There is high contrast in space. Sunlit surfaces are extremely bright, while shadows are very dark. Our engine excels at presenting this high dynamic range [HDR] in a physically accurate way. This helps create the feeling of being in space by simulating how your vision adapts when moving from bright light to deep shade and back," Jukka details.

Complimenting this powerful Direct X 9 and 10 renderer is deep PhysX integration (including support for GPU-accelerated effects on Nvidia cards), as zero-gravity gameplay wouldn't be complete without convincing animation and fully destructible bits of the Arc, level objects and wreckage. "The engine allows us to simulate zero gravity by giving all game objects—including the players—mass and other physical properties. For example, the player's legs make use of something called 'inverse kinematics.' What this means is that when you land on a surface after flying around, your legs bend realistically to absorb the impact."

Is Shattered Horizon going to run on mid-range PCs with all this tech candy? Jukka pledges: "We're aiming for high-quality production values while maintaining playability on even moderate systems. Gamers expect great graphics and effects from us, and we know we can achieve that, but our focus is on delivering fun zero-gravity gameplay that everyone can enjoy. Basically, we're prepared to invest in order to become an 'AAA' studio that gamers can trust to create original and entertaining games."

The Futuremark Games Studio crew seem convinced that their zero-gravity combat will provide gamers with a new FPS experience in Shattered Horizon, guided by a compelling and unconventional near-Earth disaster scenario and supported by striking visuals and physics. Though noncommittal on absolutes, Futuremark staff also hinted that persistent player enhancements and stats are features they're very interested in pursuing for this vision of the future, coming to PCs in mid-2009. Back in the real world, let's hope it doesn't take another 30 years before mankind enjoys a second great space age. After all, there may be valuable radioactive cheese on the moon.



(Below) MMC astronauts lead an assault against ISA forces. The player on the left takes cover near a large chunk of rock as he reloads, while his teammate moves in from an unexpected direction.

review | **System:** PC | **Developer:** Mythic Entertainment | **Publisher:** EA | **Multi:** Massively multiplayer | **ESRB:** T | **Available:** Now

Warhammer Online Age of Reckoning

World of Waagh!craft

words Mike Griffin

I'm baffled by these MMORPG reviews that appear a few days after the game's release, undoubtedly based on beta-test impressions. When it comes to this rapidly-patched genre and final reviews, I think it's only fair to reference the launch game with extensive play on minty-fresh live servers. This is especially true for Mythic Entertainment's Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning (WAR), with its deep investments in character development, questing and finely crafted Realm vs. Realm battlegrounds.

I've assumed the guise of High Elf Archmage in the live WAR game. I had previously played relentless melee/healer hybrid classes like the Human Warrior Priest and Dark Elf Disciple of Khaine, but this time I craved a pure caster with big heals and damage. The combat dynamics in Warhammer Online are excellent regardless of career selection, demanding—and rewarding—a player's steady multitasking. For melee classes, chaining certain abilities will generate heals and finishing moves that debuff or deliver crushing damage. Casters power-up their heals through offensive attacks, while damaging spells are enhanced through heals and support, ensuring that no one is pigeonholed into a limited combat role. Each career can be further differentiated via three unique Mastery Paths that supercharge a handful of abilities and bestow passive effects. My Archmage, for example, could become a focused healer, a powerful elemental damage dealer or an expert debuffer.

You'll have a chance to observe other classes in WAR's many Public Quests, one of the game's fresh contributions to the MMO genre. This is essentially a combination of the "pickup group" and "raid" experience you'd normally play inside an instanced dungeon (sadly lacking in WAR), where you form parties, meet new people, find out if they're cordial and competent, and cooperate to kill elite mobs that can't be tackled by small numbers. In WAR, anyone can stumble upon these Public Quests while exploring the world, and everyone who chips in gets a nice piece of loot when the last boss hits the floor. Combined with WAR's enormous catalog of standard quests and superbly conceived Realm vs. Realm territory wars, one's laundry list of things to do is perpetually loaded. Thankfully, a familiar interface provides effortless guidance.

A Warrior Priest prepares to engage Chaos forces.

Despite the well-conceived RPG combat and progression systems, Warhammer Online's enemy AI, animation and pathing aren't particularly sophisticated. We're not seeing any generational leap here. Mobs sometimes jerk and sway awkwardly when engaged or fleeing, large enemies like Hydras tend to have issues navigating the world, and unexpected behavior in clipping and collision occasionally obstructs your way. These are the usual MMORPG trappings; the technical compromises emblematic of the genre. WAR mitigates many issues with its smooth and reliable server performance, greatly appreciated in large-scale RvR where opposing players have no trouble pathing right up *in your face*.

This virtual world is a well-assembled representation of the venerable Games Workshop fantasy landscape, cast in similar hues and complexity as WoW, but with a superior shader model and denser foliage. Player models look increasingly impressive the higher you rank up, as it should be. When you see a top level Black Orc or Chaos Chosen (the preeminent tanks of WAR), resplendent in ruin-encrusted plate armor, trophy enemy parts dangling from shoulder spikes, it's the kind of peak potential that inspires players to finish the next quest, reach the next level and find the next great character upgrade.

> "...investments in character development, questing and finely crafted Realm vs. Realm battlegrounds."

Boiled down to a value proposition, Warhammer Online will occupy every spare moment of your time during the first (free) 30 days of gameplay, and the accumulated sum of WAR is designed to satisfy for months. There are some gaps here in technical polish, but the game is in better shape at launch than World of Warcraft was. This is not to say that WAR eclipses today's WoW, but it's the strongest contender so far.

parting shot

WAR is a premium MMORPG in the vein of Conan and WoW with deep, refreshing investments in public questing, RvR and siege gameplay that, despite some clumsy technical elements, delivers the goods.

System: PC, Xbox 360 | **Developer:** Cyanide | **Publisher:** Focus Home Interactive | **Multi:** Tournaments, leaderboards | **Available:** Q1 2009 | preview

Blood Bowl

Realm vs. realm on the gridiron

words Mike Griffin

Games Workshop is enjoying resurgence in this golden age of geekdom thanks to some well-regarded Warhammer games, including the recently released Warhammer Online. Ever wonder how your Goblin Shaman might perform as a wide receiver in an American-rules football game set in the Warhammer universe? In Cyanide's Blood Bowl, you'll create and manage entire teams of Warhammer Dwarves, High Elves, Orcs, Goblins, Lizardmen, Skaven and Chaos legions, customizing each unit's equipment and abilities RPG-style, to challenge for the Blood Bowl cup.

This preview is based on a second visit to the Cyanide development studio, where an updated build of Blood Bowl did its best to impress. At this stage the game is almost content-complete, including implementation of every Blood Bowl core rule. Rules were an especially difficult area, Designer Regis Robin explained, that ultimately required the expert touch of pro gamer testers (including last year's BB world champion). Blood Bowl is all about tactical one-on-one matches (the 360 version will support two-on-two) in the vein of classics like Archon, but with deep layers of attacks, buffs, debuffs and special powers that clash and counter each other in dozens of different ways on the playing field.

Though metal miniatures help to illustrate the action for tabletop BB players, most of the effects come to life in one's imagination. Anchored by the same core rules, the Blood Bowl game details every bone-crunching hit via surprisingly high-quality character models and terrific, unfailingly violent and amusing animations. The bristling hair of a sly ratman running back, the articulating mutant appendages of a normal-mapped Chaos linebacker, a Troll QB's massive gulp as he mistakenly swallows a goblin teammate—all impressively and hilariously realized. The same can be said for each race's distinct home stadiums: We were pleasantly surprised by the quality of the arenas, the variety of crowds and the sideline animations (cheerleaders, rowdy mobs), played by day, sunset or moonlight. Each race has access to devastating Scrolls—essentially Area of Effect spells, like the Humans' searing fireballs or the giant pounding green fists of the Orc god.

Blood Bowl pairs its attractive and idiosyncratic presentation with deep player and team management. You can buy up to 16 players per team (11 on the field) and customize each player's name, position, body type, equipment, color and special abilities, plus the core stats of movement, strength, agility and armor. Your players will level up and improve as you win matches with them. Any unit risks getting slaughtered in a game (heck, entire teams can be outright killed on the field), so Cyanide allows you to save and export your beloved players. In the Blitz play mode, you can create your own league, including divisions, championships and all names and logos, with a totally customized rule set. A group of friends could create a very specific type of private tournament and compete online over the course of days or weeks.

> "Ever wonder how your Goblin Shaman might perform as a wide receiver?"

Whether played in turn-based or real-time modes, Blood Bowl goes for the funny bone with its entertaining and strategic spectacle, capturing Games Workshop's dark humor and classic tabletop RPG rules. There's even a Fame system that gauges how much the fans are enjoying each team. Bore them with your fumbles and they may start to pelt your players with rocks. Gain the crowd's love and opposing players who get knocked out of bounds may get thrashed by the mob. Or use your Fame to bribe the ref, corrupt players and acquire illegal potions. That's pro football in the Warhammer world.

Ask Alienware

028 | 11_08

This month we discuss the advantages of Vista's ReadyBoost with shopper-friendly facts and numbers. We also come to grips with the perks of PC gaming accessories and extol the range of features in the wireless N standard.

q. My quest for the perfect ReadyBoost memory stick continues. I need to set the record straight, however: On a Windows Vista 32-bit system with 2 to 3 GB of RAM installed, is there an ideal size for the ReadyBoost stick? And how about a Vista 64-bit system (my desktop) with, let's say, 4 to 6 GB of RAM installed: Is ReadyBoost going to do *anything* at all in that configuration? And again, what's an ideal size?
Dave, TX

Alienware: ReadyBoost uses portable USB flash drives or SD cards to increase your system's disk cache. Ideally, your ReadyBoost should match or better the amount of memory in your computer. If you have 1 GB of memory, you should have 2 GB of ReadyBoost. If you have 2 GB of memory, you should have between 2 GB and 3 GB of ReadyBoost. Keep in mind, when using ReadyBoost, you have to take into consideration its diminishing effects as you increase system memory. At small amounts of memory, ReadyBoost can deliver high performance gains. With larger amounts of memory, you will still experience a performance boost, but it will be less noticeable.

q. What makes the mouse and keyboard combination so deadly, so intrinsically superior for first-person shooters? In an RPG, I understand there are lots of items, stats, dialogue to click on. Functionally, it's nice. But why do hardcore PC gamers swear by mouse and keys and laugh at console controllers when it comes to shooters? Isn't Halo 3 multiplayer super-popular with a controller? On another note, does Alienware recommend accessories or features to look for in gaming peripherals?
Chris, NY

PC gamers need programmability and customizability in their accessories—key features of Logitech's G9 and G15.

Alienware: PC gamers will always have an edge over consoles when playing FPS games. The mouse and keyboard allow for far more degrees of maneuverability and sensitivity than a controller can ever offer. Keyboards can also be programmed with various macros, allowing you to perform complex combos with a single keystroke, something not available on game controllers. We don't promote one keyboard or mouse over the rest, because these aren't one size fits all. There are some features you should look for, but from there it is just a matter of finding what you're comfortable with. A gaming keyboard should have a series of programmable keys so you can prepare macros for the moves and combos you use the most. Many gamers prefer to play in a dark room to reduce glare, so for them an illuminated keyboard is a must. As far as mice go, customization is key. Gaming mice let you customize everything from the dpi of the laser to the weight and balance of the mouse itself. Most importantly, find something ergonomic and comfortable enough for marathon gaming sessions.

> "Ideally, your ReadyBoost should match or better the amount of memory in your computer."

q. I'd like to know more about these "N" routers. They now seem to dominate the shelves of my local electronics stores. They're a little more expensive than the last generation. Okay, my question: For a midsize home with two floors, and computers in the kitchen, downstairs den and upstairs bedroom, will a centrally located N router perform any better than a G or B router? Also: does the N standard provide better gaming or media-sharing capabilities?
Terry, CA

Alienware: Since wireless N features over four times the max bit rate and almost twice the signal radius as wireless G, you will see pronounced signal improvements from centrally locating a wireless N router in your home. This applies to gaming, downloads and media sharing, due to wireless N having a stronger, more powerful signal. Keep in mind that just because you purchase a wireless N router, that does not mean you are necessarily connecting at wireless N speeds if your other computers or devices have wireless G or B receivers. To take advantage of wireless N, you will need to upgrade all your equipment.

If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts, regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bit rates and firewalls, send it along to **askalienware@playmagazine.com**. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free one-year subscription, so don't be shy!

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Aeria Games brings MegaTen to the masses

There were a few things that I knew I could always count on in this world, and one of those things was that the Shin Megami Tensei MMORPG released in Japan would never, ever see release in North America.

Well, so much for that. I just got ganked by a level 74 Jack Frost!

In what I'd nominate as possibly one of the best and worst announcements ever made, Aeria Games recently let it be known that thanks to them, Shin Megami Tensei: Imagine Online—the MMORPG based around the Persona/Megami Tensei (or MegaTen) series of modern-day supernatural RPGs from Atlus Japan—will finally be translated into English and given a chance on these shores. Good news for me, because if there was ever a franchise upon which a truly enthralling MMORPG could be built, it would be the weird and wonderful world of MegaTen. Bad news for me, because with World of Warcraft already a scourge on my social life, the last thing I need is to run two of these accursed things at the same time.

The details of the North American release of Shin Megami Tensei: Imagine Online are still being finalized, so we'll be back to share more details on the game once there are more of said details to be shared. **EP**

Get Freaky with Abandon

A few months ago we introduced you to Abandon Interactive's Freaky Creatures, a collectible-card battle-style game designed for cross-platform online play between PC and major mobile devices. The game is all about straightforward, strategic one-on-one monster battles; fun for you, fun for the kids. Creatures have head, chest, arm and tail parts to modify with dozens of powers and abilities, each calculated with a rock-paper-scissors balance. Players can train, feed and discipline their fighters in a customizable Creature Lair. Freaky Creatures will be available in stores early next year, introduced in starter packs that include two poseable creature action figures and a reusable 1 G flash drive containing the game and a random selection of creature parts, powers and lair objects. **MG**

Download this!

Abandon Interactive Entertainment has cordially invited our readers to sample the Freaky Creatures beta. Surf over to freakycreatures.com and hit the Beta link. When prompted for the super-secret code, simply insert "PLAY" (sans quotations) and you'll have priority access!

NPD GROUP

PC DATABASE

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November **2008**

Top-Selling PC Titles August 2008

01	The Sims 2 Apartment Life	EA
02	World of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Blizzard
03	The Sims 2: Double Deluxe	EA
04	World Of Warcraft	Blizzard
05	Spore Creature Creator	EA
06	Roller Coaster Tycoon	Atari
07	World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade	Blizzard
08	Civilization IV	2K Games
09	Age of Empires 3	Microsoft
10	Nancy Drew: The Phantom Of Venice	2K Games

WoW living

Life with Spore

PC POWER & COOLING
PART OF THE OCZ TECHNOLOGY GROUP

OCZ Redefines "Put Your Game Face On" with a New Way to Play PC Games

Making waves in the gaming community isn't unfamiliar territory for OCZ Technology. Their latest venture? Gaming with your "mind"…well not really, but as close as anyone has gotten thus far. The Neural Impulse Actuator, dubbed "the nia," is making a name for itself among gamers wishing they could experience Wii-like fun on their PC.

The famed OCZ "chief scientist," a.k.a. VP of Technology Development Dr. Michael Schuette, took the nia from a bulky, circa 1989-looking device and perfected it to a chic and sophisticated gaming peripheral designed to change the way we play games. He'll be the first to brag about how he got six frags on the UT3 World Champion this summer without even using a keyboard.

How does the nia work?
The nia allows you to bind the corresponding keys/mouse clicks for running, jumping, shooting, strafing, etc to electrical biosignals picked up by the three sensors on the headband. These "biosignals" include facial muscles, eye movement, and brainwaves. For example, instead of pressing "W" for forward, you can map it so that a particular "zone" of facial tension or movement causes your character to walk or run. It takes just a few steps to configure, if you don't want to use one of the profiles that are already included.

What games does the nia work with?
Any game using keyboard input.

Who is the nia for?
Anybody who wants a more immersive gaming experience and to brag about being able to game without a keyboard. It's not meant to help you game better, it's mean to help you game *differently*.

How would my game play benefit or suffer?
I don't know about your game play, but mine got a lot better! Where others have to practice reaction times, you can use reflex-based game play and cut your reaction time by 50%. In other words, the main thing is that you are acting on instinct as opposed to rational thoughts that are converted into abstract actions like pressing a key on your keyboard. However, because biosignals are more imprecise you may feel the need to practice to become as accurate as you were with a keyboard and mouse.

OCZ Technology, an expert in tweaking and squeezing every ounce of performance out of RAM, has been a leader in the memory market since 2002. Founded by gamers for gamers, OCZ has since been on a mission to deliver the very best PC gaming products to the masses.

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Released By: VIZ | **Running Time:** 138 mins (DVD) | **Rating:** NR | **Available:** September 16

ブルードラゴン

Blue Dragon

Pokémon for a new generation, with a dragon.

words Lesley Smith

"The story revolves on Shu's attempt to become the first boy in his village to become a Knight..."

Gamers in America might have split on Blue Dragon—the gorgeous-looking RPG from Sakaguchi Hironobu's Mistwalker—but Japan couldn't get enough of the game that single-handedly gave the 360 its biggest sales boost and birthed a 51 episode anime series within the span of mere months. When Japan likes something, they get it on TV, fast.

The anime series, produced by Studio Pierrot, strips away the vast majority of the plot, vying for a more clear-cut coming of age odyssey leaving only the characters (which used different Japanese actors from the game) and their respective shadows, as well as the villainous Nene, intact. The story revolves on Shu's attempt to become the first boy in his village to become a Knight, completely divorcing the anime from the game on which it was based. Together with Jiro, Marumaru, Zola Kluke and Bouquet, his journey begins across a war-torn landscape, rich in both fantasy and sci-fi elements; along for the ride are newfound friends, which happen to include a giant Blue Dragon that emerges from his shadow.

The only real bone of contention is the lack of the original Japanese audio track—this is the kid-friendly Cartoon Network version. Once the TV series has run its course an uncut/unedited English/Japanese version is imminent, but for now you'll have to use your imagination.

What Blue Dragon lacks in substance it makes up for (subjectively of course) with gorgeous character designs based on the RPG by manga-ka and all-around living legend, Akira Toriyama. His designs made the game but seem even better suited to 2-D animation than the 3-D originals. Feelings are sure to be mixed on the game's TV brethren (I can almost feel the discussions brewing), although I think it's safe to say that Xbox 360 owners who liked the game will find the anime is definitely worth a shot and at the very least it might make those of you who skipped the game want to pick up a controller, or sprout a giant killer blue shadow.

parting shot

Blue Dragon tries to imbue the essence of the game into an anime with the aid of gorgeous character designs and an awful dub.

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TOEI ANIMATION FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT

Released By: FUNimation | **Running Time:** 115 minutes | **Rating:** TV MA | **Available:** Now

CLAYMORE

Deliver us from evil

words Dave Halverson

Meet Clare: She watched here family get devoured when she was a little girl by a Yoma, a foul beast that hides inside of humans undetected, slowly taking over their brain and replicating speech, until they're one of the family. The only way to kill a Yoma is by calling a Claymore or "silver-eyed witch" like Clare, a human-Yoma hybrid that posseses incredible strength, lightning speed, masterful sword skills and the ability to smell a Yoma a mile away. Claymores are lean, beautiful, graceful, fair skinned and reclusive. They barely speak and they never smile. When called upon they arrive, detect, slaughter and leave. A man from their society picks up the payment and the Claymore moves on, edging ever closer to death. Each time a Claymore kills their Yoma side takes over a little more of the human side until the day they can no longer hold it back. On that day they use their black card, which signifies which Claymore sister they want to kill them, since death at that point is a gift, and so their closest friend will come, say goodbye and kill them. In a way, they're almost heroic, although people fear them… all accept for Rocky that is. While Clare is in the village where Rocky lives searching for a Yoma, Rocky comes home to find what's left of his uncle in a puddle of blood, but when he screams for his brother, his brother licks his chops and morphs into a slobbering beast all the while letting Rocky know how long he's waited for this moment of fine dining. A shred of humanity left in Rocky's brother pushes a tear down the Yoma's face and… thwack! Off goes an arm! Thwack! Other arm! Chonk! Clare splits him in two right down the middle, then turns around and walks away, looking back at the little boy curled up and shivering next to his brother's severed corpse like she'd kill him next. Next up for little Rocky, since his brother was infected, the villagers decide to kick him down a steep hill into the desert where he walks until he drops to the spot where he'll surely die.

Of course Rocky doesn't die. He reminds Clare of her little brother that got munched like a human corndog, so she carries him to an Inn and that's enough episode 1 to either whet your appetite or toss your cookies. Claymore has shades of Witchblade right down to the slow tragic death, although the setting is much darker, and the core tale more dramatic. Try to ignore Rocky for the 1st volume, or just make funny noises when he starts to whine. The pay-off is worth the effort.

> "When called upon they arrive, detect, slaughter and leave."

parting **shot**

Anime series built around strong female protagonists are a rare commodity as it is, so the bittersweet underpinnings really hit home. Sure, it's got rivers of blood and features the poster child for wussies, but sooner or later that blood may be his. I kid Rocky! All will be revealed when you get to the twist...

EVERYONE WEARS A MASK

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DARKER THAN BLACK 黒の契約者

FUNIMATION.COM/DARKERTHANBLACK

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ANIPLEX FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT

Released By: FUNimation | **Running Time:** 125 mins | **Rating:** 17+ | **Available:** November 25

Darker Than BLACK

Back in Black

words Bill Gray

"Cowboy Bebop was the last, best sci-fi anime I've seen—but DTB is shaping up to be just as good..."

Talk about potential. After watching the first few episodes of *Darker Than Black*, I was hooked. *Cowboy Bebop* was the last, best sci-fi anime I've seen—but DTB is shaping up to be just as good, assuming Studio BONES, of *Full-metal Alchemist* fame, can keep up the pace.

Tokyo has been partially destroyed yet again, a familiar trope in anime. This time, the culprit is an abnormality ominously dubbed "Hell's Gate." Fast-forward ten years. A *Truman Show*-esque wall has been built around the gate, and life has returned to normal, or so it seems. Unknown to the public, beings that look human but possess extra-human powers called "Contractors" live and work among us. Amoral and motivated only by personal gain, "Contractors" sell their skills as spies and assassins to the highest bidders: syndicates and national governments. Ironically, whenever a Contractor uses his powers, a "price" must be paid unique to each Contractor. The price can be anything, from the bizarre to the trivial, but it's different for every Contractor.

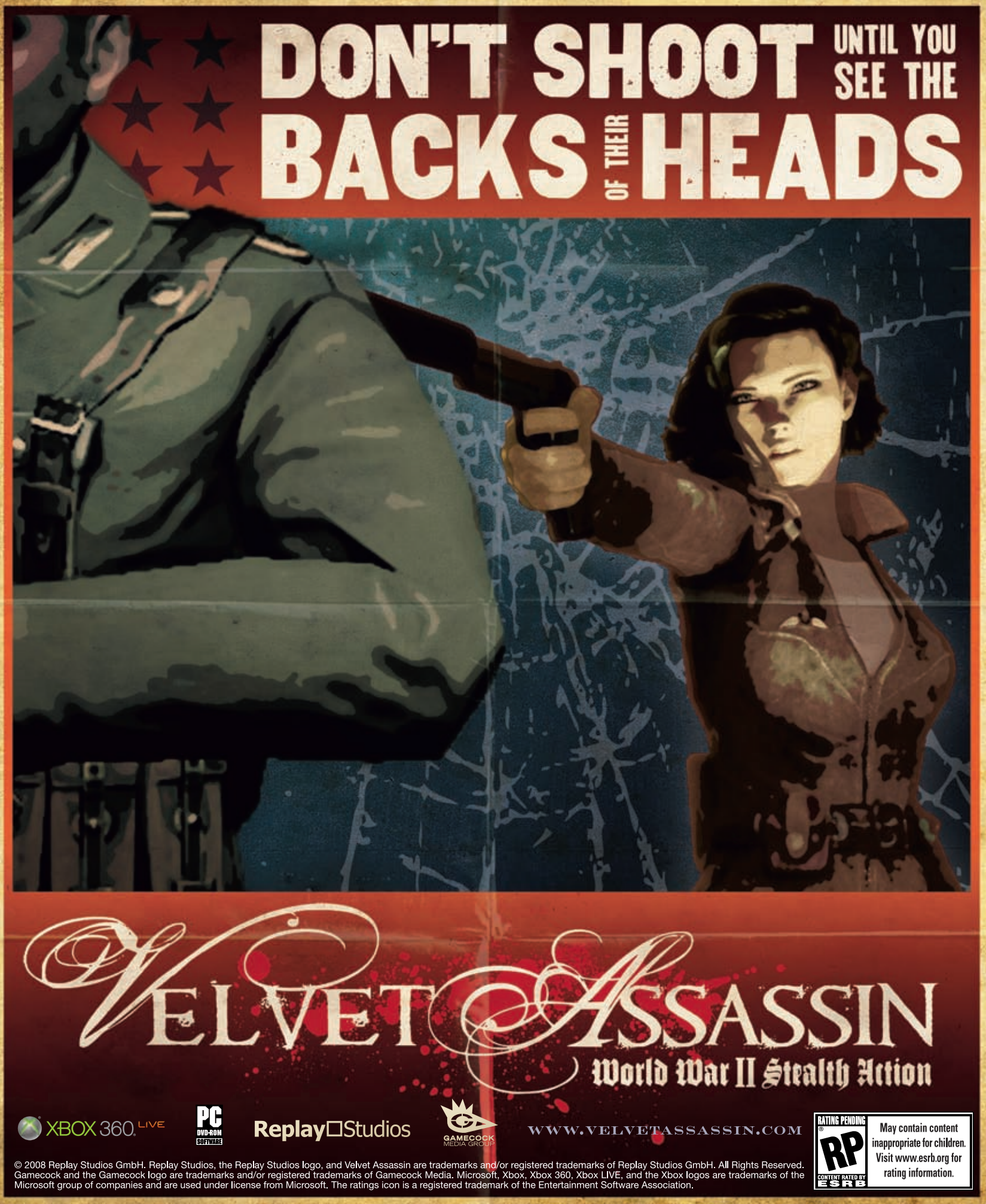
Darker revolves around Hei, a Contractor who can generate electricity, and his team. Hei is a fascinating character, equal parts shy, caring student and cold-blooded killer. He seems to hate other Contractors, and by extension, himself. The first episodes track Hei's efforts to find and protect a woman, Chiaki Shinoda, from other Contractors seeking to black her out. It also introduces his team: a Contractor who seems to be a talking cat, a girl who can use water to spy on people, and a no-nonsense, Harvey Keitel figure. The team's loyalties, however, remain unclear, illustrating the mercenary nature of Contractor life.

In terms of artwork and animation, *Darker* is in the black here as well. Bleak cityscapes and somber industrial sites dominate the scenery of *Darker*, a fitting environment for the troubled Hei. The crisp animation, especially on the numerous fight scenes, is a joy to watch, particularly when accompanied by the Yoko Kanno score. And Funimation has put together another excellent dub, casting Jason Liebrecht perfectly as Hei.

What has me so excited about *Darker*, though, is its resonant characters and excellent pacing. You can't help wanting to know more about the ambiguous Hei, his team, and the mystery of Contractors in general. My only complaint was that I just had two episodes on which to base my review. Still, it's easy to see that Funimation has another winner its hands—I can't wait for the first volume.

parting shot

Darker has everything—slick action, gorgeous animation, a fascinating sci-fi concept, and a compelling tragic hero. Welcome to the Dark side.



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HOW MUCH OF A GOOD THING IS TOO MUCH?

YEAH...STUPID QUESTION

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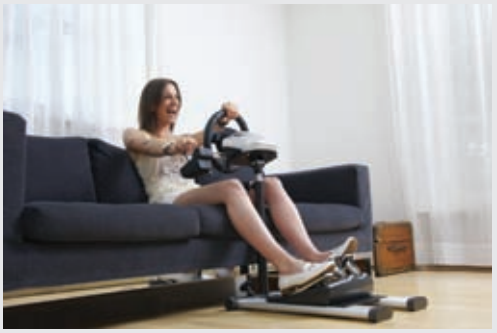


First revealed back at the Leipzig GC, high end peripheral maker Fanatec is preparing to unleash the Porsche 911 Carrera Racing Wheel in December. For those who missed the first officially licensed Porsche gaming wheel, the ultra high-quality 911 Turbo, you'll be happy to know that the forthcoming Carrera edition slices over half the price off its predecessor, set to MSRP at $149.95.

The Porsche 911 Carrera Racing Wheel includes a strong Mabuchi RS 550 force feedback motor with on-the-fly feedback adjustment, interchangeable gear sticks in 6 + 1 Speed or H-pattern configs that can be securely fastened to either side of the wheel, and unique parts for each pedal, such as a declining resistance mechanism for the clutch. The 300mm diameter wheel is coated in high quality TPE rubber (shaving a few bucks off the 911 Turbo's lush leathers). The Carrera Racing Wheel is compatible with all PC and PS3 games that include force feedback, and optional accessories include the Clubsport table clamp, RennSport Wheel Stand (which supports a number of racing wheels on the market), and deluxe sequential gear stick. -Mike Griffin

HP Voodoo Envy 133

Weighing in at less than 3.4 pounds and .70 inches thin, HP's Voodoo Envy 133 is one of the slimmest and lightest multi-purpose notebooks in its class. The Envy was developed with the smallest available Intel Centrino technology using an innovative new Intel reference design. Despite its diminutive size, the Envy is loaded with technologies previously unseen in the ultra-mobile segment.

The durable carbon fibre-based Voodoo Envy 133 features a beautiful 13.3-inch display, multi-gesture touchpad, backlit keyboard, integrated webcam, USB, audio, VGA and HDMI ports, and Dolby Sound Room surround technology. Its innovative power brick includes a LAN jack that allows untethered point-to-point Wi-Fi—very handy when there's no wireless signal nearby.

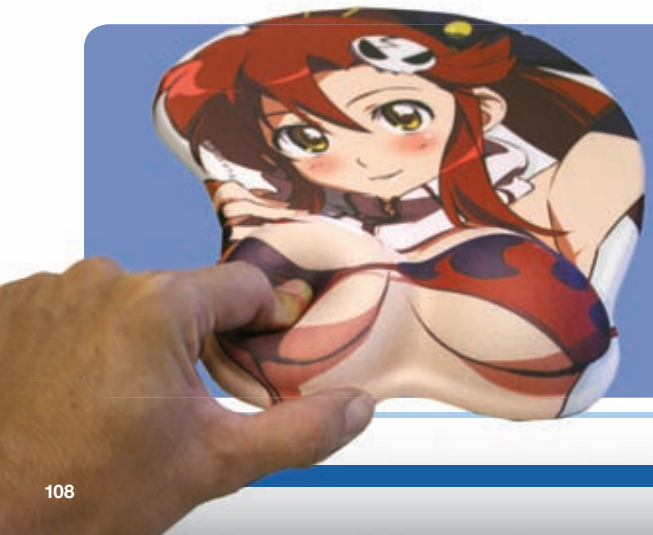
Customers can choose from a vast palette of Voodoo Allure paint finishes for their Envy, as well as custom microweave color highlights and personalized laser engravings. This outstanding ultra-mobile notebook starts at $2,099 and is now shipping. -MG

Metallica on your Skull!

When the king of speakers for your head SKULLCANDY gets together with the greatest rock band of our time, or anytime, Metallica, you know the results are going to be good, hence, the 1st limited edition, Artist Series headphones: The Metallica Hesh (50mm high explosive power drivers, soft snake skin leather earpads, in line volume control and sound-boosting parabolic ear-cups) come with LEGAL download of the band's 9th studio album "Death Magnet" (album of the year) for $69.95, or for $49.95 the Metallica Lowrider packs a monster 40mm power driver in a small lowrider chassis and includes smooth styling, 90 degree swivel, DJ-style speakers, and a unique fold-up headband for portability. -DH

Penguin 4X Quad Charging Station for Wii

Every few seconds of every day somebody is looking for the Wii Remote, or scavenging the junk drawer trying to find two matching AA Batteries. Penguin has the cure. The 4X Quad will charge up to 4 Wii Remotes simultaneously with upwards of 13 hours of worry-free battery life in about 4 hours, and the Li-Ion battery (Ni-Mh is so yesterday) assures 13 hours with every charge. The Quad also has a charge percentage LED that tracks your juice level in 25% increments so you always know when your Wii Remote is low. We've had ours for a couple of months and it's never leaving. Looks cool with the lights off too. $44.99 - Dave Halverson



Yoko 3D Oppai Mouse Pad from Gurren Lagann!

Say hello to the last mouse pad you'll ever buy. When Jlist claims that the Yoko 3D Oppai Mouse Pad will keep your wrist ergonomically supported (because that's why you'd buy it) they mean it. Trust me I know, because my wrist has been nuzzled between Yoko's lady lumps for the last 20 hours, cross my heart. Truth be told Yoko's all over my office. Gurren Lagann is the best thing to happen to anime in a long time. Am I wrong to wish it had nipples? $58.00 www.jlist.com -DH

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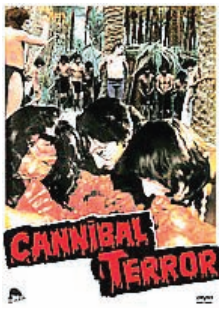
Cannibal Terror

Studio: Severin Films | **Genre:** Horror | **Rated:** NR

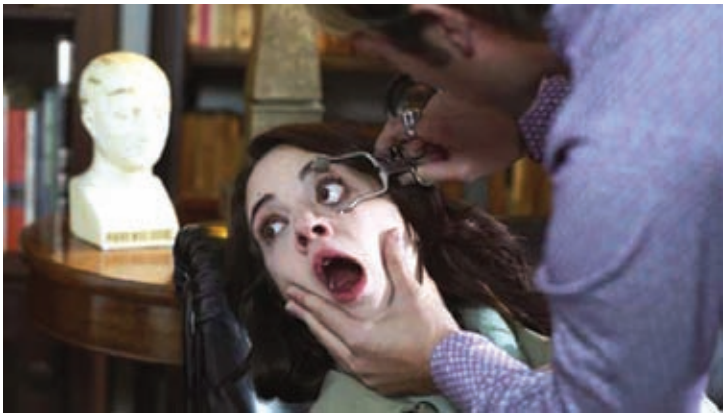


One of the most hilariously inept entries in the risible subgenre of European cannibal films, *Cannibal Terror* presents a Japanese gameshow-style challenge to the viewer's logic and sanity with stunning technical incompetence and flashes of accidental surrealism. Recounting the plot is pointless – a gang of child kidnappers decide to wait out the ransom in a jungle infested with man-eating natives – so the real "joy" (for bad film fans, at least) of the picture is watching the movie stockpile idiocies like so many wrecked cars. For those who don't like surprises, the film's faults run the gamut from haphazardly used stock footage (from Jesus Franco's *Cannibals*) and a mind-numbing score to atrocious dubbing and drippy gore that seems stolen from a JayCees haunted house. The biggest laughs are reserved for the cannibals themselves, a ragged collection of pot-bellied white guys who can barely keep from bursting into laughter. The DVD includes the theatrical trailer and a "spicy" scene involving two ladies who break out into a spontaneous striptease. **Paul Gaita**

Mother of Tears

Studio: Dimension Extreme | **Genre:** Horror | **Rated:** NR

Mother of Tears is a berserk return to form for Italian horror director Dario Argento, who's struggled to best his '70s efforts (*Deep Red*) for the better part of the last two decades. *Tears* forgoes his recent stalk-and-slash retreads in favor of the nightmarish illogic of his most widely seen and acclaimed feature, *Suspiria* – it's in fact a sequel of sorts and part of a trilogy that includes 1980's *Inferno*. Here, as in those films, a flood of occult happenings signal the return of a superwitch (the most powerful of a trio known as the Three Mothers) who will bring the world to an end. Argento's daughter Asia is the art student whose investigation into the Mother of Tears reveals her own latent supernatural powers, which offer the only hope against her blood-soaked, sex-crazed coven. Argento hasn't been this visually and viscerally unhinged in years, and presents a stunning mix of violence and imagery that, with any luck, will convince the current crop of knuckleheads mining the horror field to just give up altogether. No such luck, I'm sure, but this is one of the strongest new efforts from an established genre master in years. **PG**



Syngenor Special Edition

Studio: Synapse Films | **Genre:** Horror | **Rated:** NR

As the rules governing movie monsters clearly state, any creature created in a laboratory will break out of said structure by the 15 or 20 minute mark in a given film and wreak havoc on nearby persons and establishments. This applies to Syngenor (or Synthesized Genetic Organism to you and me), a nightmarish super soldier with a taste for spinal fluid developed by the sinister Norton Cyberdyne corporation. The monsters (designed by William Malone, later director of the *House on Haunted Hill* remake), which show a remarkable proclivity for reproducing en masse, are later met by the combined force of a reporter and the niece of a victim. So much for humanity. Though by no means a good movie, *Syngenor* is a fun timewaster of the rubber monster suit variety, and features a show-stopping performance by the late David Gale, best known as the amorous severed head in *Re-Animator*. Synapse's DVD includes bemused commentary by cast and crew members, as well as making-of featurettes. **PG**

Icons of Horror 3: Hammer Films

Studio: Sony Pictures | **Genre:** Horror | **Rated:** NR

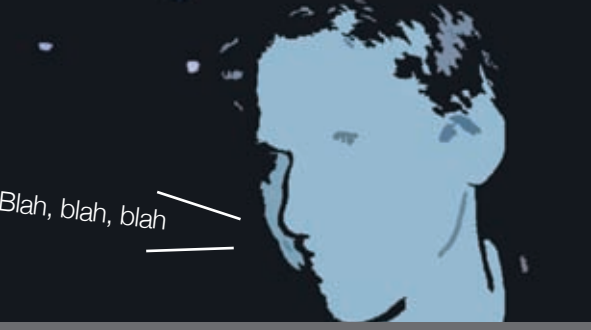
"Iconic" might not be the right terms for this quartet of '60s fright flicks from England's venerable house of horrors, Hammer Films – you'll find no Dracula or Frankenstein lurking in the double-disc set – but the company's trademark combination of atmosphere and straight-ahead shocks are on full display, and should be enough to keep old-school creature feature fans happy. Hammer's biggest star, Christopher Lee, appears in three of the four pics, the most enjoyable of which is probably *The Gorgon*, in which he's re-teamed with Peter Cushing to fight the title monster, a snake-headed she-devil from Greek mythology. Lee also lends solid support to the amusingly saucy *Two Faces of Dr. Jekyll* and *Scream of Fear*, a likable *Psycho* knock-off loaded with red herrings and sinister motives. *Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* is the sole ringer in the set; it's as leaden as its dirty-sheet fiend. No extras save the original trailers, unfortunately, but the lack of supplements is overruled by the sheer rush of Saturday afternoon-style shivers provided by the movies themselves. **PG**

Last House on the Beach

Studio: Severin Films | **Genre:** Thriller/Exploitation | **Rated:** NR

One of several ugly Italian knock-offs of Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* unleashed on grindhouse audiences in the early to mid-'70s, *Last House on the Beach* (actual title: *La Settima Donna* or *The Seventh Woman*) is the handiwork of director Franco Prosperi, whom we can thank (along with partner Gualtiero Jacopetti) for everything from *Faces of Death* to Girls Gone Wild and TMZ for their series of questionably ethical "shockumentaries" like *Mondo Cane* and *Farewell Uncle Tom*. Surprisingly, the nasty plot – three desperate types lay siege to a gaggle of teenage girls and their teacher (Florinda Bolkan), an ex-nun that later wreaks bloody revenge – is delivered in a relatively restrained manner, and the proceedings are photographed with an attractive sheen that makes even the grimiest moments seem palatable. Severin's DVD includes an interview with the leader of the creepy trio (Ray Lovelock) and both the Italian and German trailers. **PG**

"...photographed with an attractive sheen that makes even the grimiest moments seem palatable."



BACK OF THE BOOK

11_08 CASEY LOE
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

ENOUGH WITH THE $79.99 WORTHLESS TRINKET EDITIONS

> "So shape up, America. Don't bother making a limited edition if you're just going to cram $2 worth of crap into a faux-metal box."

Every day when I sit down at my desk to play videogames and complain about things, my limited edition Big Daddy figurine stares up at me with its cluster of 10 hand-painted pewter eyeholes and asks, "Why does every other limited edition suck so goddamn much?"

How is it that a 6-inch hand-painted metal figure can be packaged with a music CD of Moby remixes and a making-of DVD and sold for a mere $10 over Bioshock's regular retail price, while nowadays a bunch of stickers, a DVD, a toy of the sort that comes free in a box of Count Chocula, and a coupon redeemable for $2 worth of downloadable junk apparently costs twice that? Is it because of the so-called "steel" boxes, which look and feel a lot like aluminum-foil-coated cardboard?

Once upon a time, by which I mean *early last year*, limited editions were viewed as a way to make a modest dollar or two in additional profits while also creating publicity for your game. Now it seems to have evolved into some sort of Priceline-esque scam where each customer states how much they're willing to pay and the publisher throws worthless trinkets at them until they feel they've justified the price. "There are eight editions of Fallout 3 to choose from," Amazon cheerfully informs me, as I attempt to preorder it. I'm surprised it bothers to list them instead of just running a credit check and determining the price point that's best suited to my finances.

The tragic thing is, most special editions aren't even cool. The point is clearly to just get as many bullet points on the package as possible, so no one wants to blow their budget creating something well-made and desirable like the Bioshock Big Daddy figurine. Instead, you get a bunch of stuff that had been lying around on the developers' desks, including making-of documentaries that ran on G4 six months ago, "exclusive" trailers, a few MP3s from the soundtrack, the ever popular, intentionally vague "digital content," and some artwork. Truly devious companies can cram all of this onto a single DVD, giving them a box with 11 bullet points and only two physical items (I'm looking at you, Capcom!). When companies are willing to drop a buck or two on an actual printed art book, it ends up sub-postcard size so it can fit into the damn box, which completely negates the purpose. And then, of course, there's always a bonus item or two from the random nonsense column: the "fate cards" in Fable II, the "tournament bracket card" in Soul Calibur IV, and the "photo of Dom and his wife" in Gears of War 2. Combined retail value: one-third of a cent!

These days, if a game comes with anything more than these valueless trinkets, you're looking at a $79.99 price point. Apparently, bobbleheads, plastic figurines and so-thin-you-can-see-your-man-nipples T-shirts now cost around $15 to manufacture, and McDonald's is eating a $14.50 loss when they give away the same items for free with their Happy Meals.

I don't begrudge a company's desire to make a bit of extra money to defray development costs. Special editions exist everywhere, for everything, and are always overpriced. But at least in Japan special editions come with cool, creative stuff, not the perfunctory junk we get here. Take Valkyria Chronicles, which came with a nice figurine of the heroine, a functioning remote-control tank modeled after the one in the game, and a magazine-size art book (additional cost: $20). World Destruction, Valkyrie Profile and several other time-themed games have had special editions that included working 19th-century-style metal pocket watches. But my personal favorite is Finder Love, a Capcom-published PSP game in which the player photographs scantily-clad models. In addition to the usual trinkets, it comes with a full-size two-piece "image bikini" (one of three!) worn by the girls in the game. For the moment, let's put aside the question of what, exactly, this game's target audience of single horny men is going to do with those bikinis (which, the small print notes, are not actually intended to be usable as swimwear), and focus on the fact that it's at least creative and true to the game. I think that's the main reason that many of the finer Japanese limited editions now sell for hundreds of dollars, while the $70 premium you paid for Halo 3's legendary cat helmet has raised its after-market value by all of $10. Wise investment, that.

So shape up, America. Don't bother making a limited edition if you're just going to cram $2 worth of crap into a faux-metal box. Instead, take some inspiration from Japan and turn that worthless photo of Dom and his wife into a "limited edition Dom's wife's image panties." No, wait—don't do that. In fact, forget I mentioned Japan at all. Just try to come up with something a little cooler than what you're doing now, okay?

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November, 2008

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Cartoon Violence
Mild Suggestive Themes

PLAYSTATION 3

viz media

SHONEN JUMP

BANDAI NAMCO Games

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Games for Windows

XBOX 360 LIVE

PlayStation 2

PLAYSTATION 3

TEEN T
Blood
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Wii

NINTENDO DS

CRYSTAL DYNAMICS

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